THE HORUS HERESY®
Gav Thorpe
CORAX
Nevermore
The primarch of the Raven Guard wages
his bitter guerrilla war against the traitors

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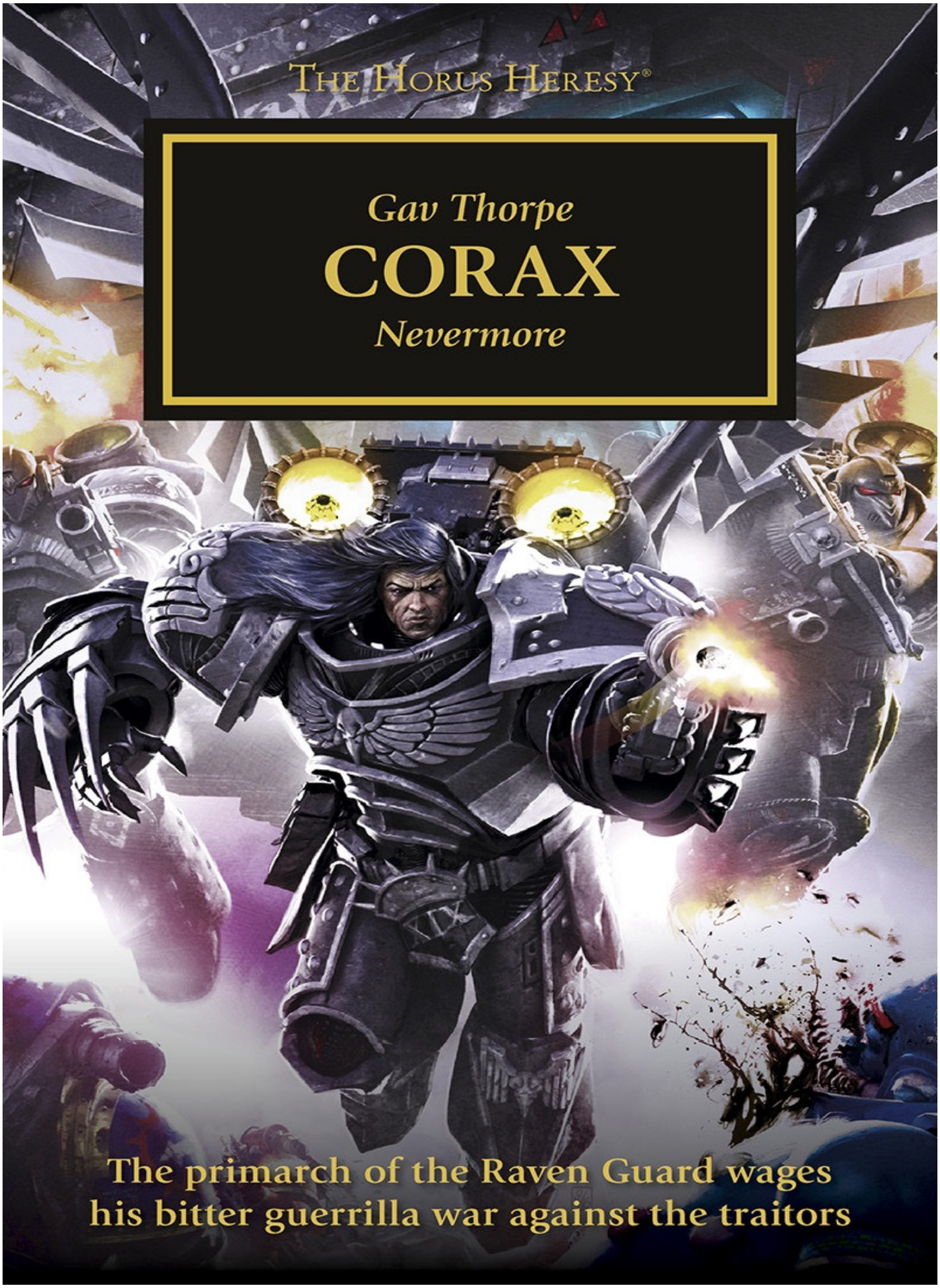
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THE HORUS HERESY®

Gav Thorpe

CORAX

Nevermore

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

Missiles streaked across the dusk sky towards the Raven Guard and their allies, and Corax traced their trails to a battery of a dozen Whirlwinds on the opposite side of the valley. The cleft between the mountains was full of light – the glow of slowly descending illuminator shells and the blaze of lamps from vehicles and power armour.

The yellow glare shone on the war-plate and battle tanks of the World Eaters. Some squads and individuals still wore the blue and white of their old Legion colours, though many were clad in red, either paint or blood, their Imperial insignia defaced or obliterated completely.

Cerebral implants drove them into a battle-madness, their brains awash with a cocktail of stimulants and artificial rage impulses. The berserk warriors of the World Eaters pounded towards the squads waiting for them on the mountainside while their tanks and guns belched shells, rockets and plasma to pave the way for the assault. Through the rumble of engines and the thunder of explosions, the primarch of the Raven Guard could hear their hate-filled bellows and snarled battle-cries.

Explosions rocked the slopes, the Whirlwinds hammering legionaries and ferrocrete aegis-walls in fountains of fire. Corax turned his gaze to the left, along the massive viaduct that crossed from one peak to the next along the flank of his position. Above the kilometres-long bridge Thunderhawks and Stormbirds ascended towards the higher slopes, watched over by sweeping patrols of Lightning fighters. Below streamed columns of another foe, thousands of Space Marines advanced beneath banners depicting the hydra of the Alpha Legion. As he knew only too well, for years they had played shadow games, trying to win by manipulation and subversion, but now they came in numbers to deliver the last blow alongside their uneasy allies.

Out to the west, ten kilometres distant, the foothills were awash with a force even greater in number, comprised of traitorous regiments of the Imperial Army. A sea of soldiers from a score of worlds. Had they bargained their lives to Horus out of loyalty? Had the whispers of the Alpha Legion and sermons of the Word Bearers turned small grudges and local aspirations into abhorrence of the Emperor, and even grander ambitions? Or did a darker force push them to service – the fist of Horus clenched above their home worlds, threatening destruction to the disloyal?

The same could be asked of the pilots of the Knight walkers and Titan crews whose massive war engines moved in support of the traitor regiments. Threats and promises were as much a part of the rebels' armoury as bolters and super-heavy tanks.

No such question surrounded the presence of the last component of the forces assembled for the final attack. Phalanxes of red-armoured legionaries marched in precise step along the flank of the World Eaters, keeping pace with immense tracked engines of destruction and outlandish war machines that

hovered several metres above the undulating ground – floating constructs and towers that pulsed and flickered with unnatural energies.

The Thousand Sons of Magnus. Scions of dead Prospero.

Corax looked down at his companion, a Space Marine in storm-grey armour heavily scarred by the mark of bolt, shrapnel and las-beam. Though the enamel of his plate was much chipped and cracked, his Legion symbol was still visible.

A red wolfshead.

'The Wolves of Fenris have made a lot of enemies,' Corax murmured.

Bjorn did not look up at the primarch, but flexed his powered claws. 'Nothing occurred that they did not earn.'

He turned away and started up the hill towards the fortifications. Corax turned his back on the enemy and followed while more shells and missiles raked across the rocks and emplacements of the mountain slope.

His long strides took him towards the keep raised by the Space Wolves, their last line of defence. Like a massive barbican, two towering orbital landers formed an arch, their lifted gull-wings creating a gateway forty metres across. Macrocannon turrets pounded out a steady rhythm, the rounds from each four-gun salvo descended like meteors into the valley to lay a bloody firestorm upon the advancing World Eaters and Thousand Sons. Around them anti-aircraft weapons chattered and hissed shells and las into the sky, blanketing the heavens with a storm to deter even the most foolhardy aerial assault. The air crackled with the ships' overlapping void shields and Corax's armour sparked as he crossed the line of the energy barrier.

He ignored the chill as his steps took him into the shadow of the great dropships. Ahead, a cavernous space opened up before him, but the regular cut of the walls betrayed an artificial birth to the hangar-like space within the mountain peak. As well as dozer-marked rock, the stone bore the glassy sheen of phase-field excavation.

A hundred battle tanks and transports nestled within the cavern. Around them the Space Wolves gathered about their pack-leaders and commanders. They checked their weapons and made final oaths to each other, swearing their lives away against the treachery of Horus.

There was not a vehicle nor warrior among them unmarked by battle. In turrets and cupolas those that could no longer walk had taken up roles as gunners, and others similarly crippled occupied the driving positions of the Predators, Land Raiders, Rhinos, Mastodons, Vindicators and other vehicles that remained of the VI Legion's armoured strength. Bike and jetbike squadrons prowled the periphery like animals waiting to be unleashed from their cages. Slab-sided behemoths strode amongst the sons of Fenris – Dreadnoughts interred with the near-destroyed bodies of Legion heroes.

Bjorn led the primarch up metal steps and into a long tunnel that inclined sharply, turning through several switchbacks until it reached a chamber more than a hundred metres above the main hall.

Silence greeted them. Eighteen Space Wolves, the jarls of the Legion and the survivors of Russ's own Wolf Guard, crowded the room. They parted at the approach of Corax while Bjorn took up the vigil alongside his brothers. They surrounded a bier fashioned from the top plates of a Land Raider, propped up at shallow angle on spare pauldrons.

Upon the bier lay Leman Russ.

The primarch's armour was broken in many places, thick with his congealed blood. His face was a mask of pain, lips drawn back to reveal broken teeth, one eye swollen closed by bruised flesh and shattered orbital bone.

A hiss escaped the injured primarch's gritted teeth. His eyes flickered open but his gaze danced around the room without lucid sight. Corax lowered to a knee so that he might hear better.

‘Death... At your call... I shall return...’ whispered Russ. He sat up suddenly and grasped the gorget of Corax’s armour. There was madness in the Wolf King’s eyes. ‘The Wolftime! I hear... the snarl of the beast...’

He lapsed into wordless snarls and grunts. Corax pried his brother’s fingers from his armour and let him slump back onto the bier. Laying a hand upon Russ’s chest he could feel the twin beats of the primarch’s hearts, as strong and fierce as ever. His body was broken, but it was his mind, his soul, that had suffered the greatest wounds.

An odd sound drew his attention back to Russ’s face. The primarch sobbed, eyes closed, breath coming in short gasps.

‘I failed,’ croaked the Lord of Fenris. ‘Darkness... Hel awaits...’

Corax cradled Russ’s head against his chest, unsure and unnerved by the sight of one of his strongest brothers cast so low. Seeing the Raven Guard primarch’s fell expression, the assembled Wolf Lords threw back their heads and howled, and the noise of their laments echoed through the corridors and halls of their last outpost.

Corax spoke quietly, the question asked of himself.

‘How did we come to this?’

SOULFORGE

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'

CORVUS CORAX, Primarch
AGAPITO, Commander of the Talons
SOUKHOUNOU, Commander of the Hawks
BRANNE, Commander of the Raptors
NAVAR HEF, Raptor sergeant
STRADON BINALT, Techmarine

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

AZOR NATHRAKIN, Librarian-sorcerer
SAGITHA ALONS NEORTALLIN, Indentured Navigator

The Mechanicum of Constanix II

DELVERE, Archmagos, Master of Iapetus
VANGELLIN, Cognoscenti Magokritarch of Atlas
LORIARK, Cybernetica, Magos Senioris of Third District
BASSILI, Biologis, Primus Cogenitor, Third District
FIRAX, Magos Biologis, Third District
SALVA KANAR, Magos Logistica, Third District
LACRYMENTHIS, Cogitatoris Regular, Third District

ONE

He had not felt this way for a long time. Not in the decades since he had fought alongside the primarch to rid his home of its technocratic enslavers had Agapito been possessed of such vigour. It burned through him, giving him strength beyond his transhuman physique, every swing of his power sword energised by the purity of his cause.

Righteousness.

It was a hatred that boiled inside the Raven Guard commander, sending him without hesitation into the slaves of the accursed Word Bearers. Following Corax on the Emperor's Great Crusade had given Agapito purpose and determination, but the near-rage that propelled him into battle now was of an order far above duty and dedication.

It was fate that had delivered the hated foe into the hands of the Raven Guard. A chance encounter on the edge of the Cassik system – the Word Bearers caught with warp engine trouble and unable to flee. Agapito would not let the opportunity pass lightly.

This was providence, though from what higher power Agapito did not know, nor care. The slayers of his brothers would in turn be slain. The betrayal of Isstvan would be avenged, one traitor at a time if necessary. The memories of thousands of Raven Guard culled like vermin by the guns of the Word Bearers were like daggers in the commander's chest, their piercing a goad to drive him onwards.

He spied a traitor legionary amongst the crew that had spilled forth along the corridors to defend their strike cruiser against the boarding of the Raven Guard. The sight of the Word Bearer brought back a flood of recollection: cannons and las-fire scything across the Urgall Depression, leaving scores of dead sons of Deliverance with each salvo; the vox-net swamped by the cries of the dying and the shock of treachery; warriors he had fought alongside for many years ripped from the world of the living by cold-blooded murderers.

The half-human servitors and misshapen henchmen of the traitor legionary were no obstacle, easily thrown aside by Agapito's charge. In the confines of the strike cruiser the Raven Guard could not be matched. Agapito wreaked bloody ruin with sword and fist, slashing and punching his way into the press of mutated foes without a moment's regard for the blades and mauls clattering from his armour.

Towering over the mass of freakish slaves, Agapito could see the Word Bearer as the traitor exhorted his minions to hurl themselves against the Raven Guard warriors. Dozens of slaves fell, their bodies rent with

gruesome wounds, as Agapito and his legionaries thrust along the passage.

Breaking free from the throng, the commander paused, eyes fixed on his target as the red-armoured legionary waited a few metres away. The Word Bearer raised his chainsword to the grille of his helm, a mocking salute and a challenge to mortal combat.

Agapito was not here to duel, to exchange strike and parry in an effort to determine the worthy. He was here to avenge, to punish, to kill.

A blast from his plasma pistol seared through the armoured breast of the Word Bearer as he lowered his blade, turning ceramite and flesh to greasy slag. The Word Bearer toppled face-first to the deck as Agapito dashed onwards, carving into the sub-human creatures that served the Legion of Lorgar.

A few more seconds, a flurry of blows and shots, and Agapito was left standing over a mound of dead foes. A squad of his Talons – all survivors of Isstvan too – gathered around their leader.

'Quadrant clear, commander,' reported Sergeant Ashel. The legionary's armour was coated with blood, the black paint glistening with fresh gore. He looked down at the remains of the enemy. The corpses were of men and women twisted and mutated, with eyes and skin like snakes, and sharp teeth filling wide mouths. 'Vile filth.'

'Not so vile as those that lead them,' snarled Agapito.

He listened to the vox-net for a few seconds, picking out the interleaved reports and messages from other forces spreading out through the enemy strike cruiser. Squads Chovani and Kalain were encountering stiffer resistance than the others: more Word Bearers.

'We head to starboard,' the commander told his companions. 'Follow me.'

'The reactor chamber is aft, commander,' Ashel replied, staying where he was as Agapito took a step. 'The primarch's orders are–'

'The *enemy* are to starboard,' Agapito snapped. 'As are the escape shuttles. Do you wish them to elude their punishment? Have you forgotten Isstvan so quickly?'

Ashel glanced back at his squad for a moment, and shook his head.

'For Isstvan,' the sergeant said, lifting his bolter.

'For Isstvan,' Agapito replied.

Disgust welled up inside Corax as he pulled the blades of his lightning claw from the body of the crewman. The liquid that sprayed across the corridor was not human blood but a foul greenish fluid, fed through the slave from a brass cylinder riveted to his back. Many others, similarly altered, lay dead around him. At first Corax had thought the creatures mindless servitors, but the fear and desperation in their eyes had betrayed a spark of life not seen in the half-human creations of the Mechanicum. They were men and women with fully human faculties, modified and experimented upon by their Word Bearers masters.

The primarch's disgust was not for the pitiful figures that flung themselves into his path, but for the traitors that had created them. The followers of Lorgar had become wicked, inhuman things – a twisted parody of the honourable legionaries they had once been.

In the red light of the passageway his lightning claws gleamed. Crafted by his own hand on Deliverance after the victory at the Perfect Fortress, the weapons made him feel complete again. The Raven's Talons, his warriors called them – as much a symbol to the Legion of their determination to fight on despite their losses as they were weapons. Corax had forgone his flight pack in the close confines of the boarding action, but he felt as comfortable in the arched halls and winding corridors as he did the open skies.

He had been taught to fight in a place like this: a maze of ferrocrete and metal where every corner hid a potential foe. In the prison where he had been raised, endless passageways had become his hunting

ground. He had never forgotten the lessons.

He did not head directly for the strategium but chose a less obvious path that would circumvent the strongest defences. The strike cruiser was like so many others in layout, with a central corridor running for most of the length of the ship; but Corax instead made his way along the gun decks, already ravaged by the broadsides of the *Avenger* as the battle-barge had closed for the boarding. In places the hull had been cracked wide, leaving the batteries open to the freezing void. The primarch, with a memorised schematic of the *Avenger*'s last pre-attack scan in mind, found routes around the breached sections, moving up and down through the decks to keep the defenders uncertain of the Raven Guard's route.

With him came a company from the *Avenger*, but for the moment the legionaries were little more than onlookers as the primarch carved his way towards the starship's strategium. It seemed the Word Bearers had thought it wiser to unleash their horde of mutated creations rather than face the ire of the primarch themselves.

They were not wrong.

Advancing swiftly, Corax encountered several dozen more slaves in the next gallery, armed with nothing more than wrenches, hammers and lengths of chain. Some had cybernetics grafted to them, others carried the artificial ichor-tanks he had already seen. All of them had pale skin slicked with the sweat of exertion and dread, their eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. They did not shout any war cry as they ran at the primarch, and there was resignation, perhaps even relief, in their eyes as his lightning claws slashed left and right, hewing them down by the handful.

None of the crew-creatures survived long enough to strike Corax as he waded into their midst, his energy-sheathed fists turning metal to splinters and flesh to spatters. Glancing through the windows of the gallery he saw the *Avenger* holding course alongside the boarded ship, and beyond that the gleam of plasma engines from the *Triumph* and *Aeruginosis*, while further away still waited the rest of the Raven Guard flotilla.

Had they arrived two or three days later the Word Bearers might have continued on their way, to wreak whatever malevolence they intended. Good fortune for the Raven Guard had brought the enemy out of the warp just a few thousand kilometres from where the Legion had been mustering. Even before the bombardment by the Raven Guard, the traitor ship had shown signs of prolonged combat, damaged warp engines amongst its more obvious battle scars. Whatever had forced the strike cruiser to travel in such a state had to be important.

So it was that Corax sought to capture the vessel and learn its secrets, rather than destroy it out of hand.

Resistance grew stronger as the Raven Guard neared their objective. Securing the chambers and halls surrounding the strategium, the primarch and his warriors created a cordon clear of enemies. The rooms were strangely devoid of decoration. On the few occasions that Corax had spent time on Word Bearers ships before the Warmaster had turned, he had marvelled at the carvings and banners, icons and murals dedicated to the celebration of the Emperor and his deeds. What must have once been the officers' quarters were now empty shells, devoid of furnishing and embellishment, as though everything that once had lauded the Emperor had been expunged.

The strategium portals – two sets of huge double doors sealed by immense lockbolts – proved to be only a minor obstacle. Corax's lightning claws cut through one of the doors with a few blows, sending the reinforced plasteel tumbling into the darkened command chamber.

Corax was taken aback for a moment by the quiet. He had expected a hail of fire to greet his entry, and his charge onto the mezzanine overlooking the main floor of the bridge faltered as he met no resistance.

Glancing around the chamber, the primarch was confronted by clusters of interred servitors meshed with glowing consoles, their half-dead faces and withered limbs nearly white in the glow of the static that

filled the main screen. Lights winked on and off in the gloom, the red and amber of failing systems, while exposed wiring buzzed and flickered. The chamber was filled with a faint smell of decay coming from the servitors; of flesh slowly going rank, mixed with oil and rust.

'Where are the Word Bearers?' asked Commander Soukhounou. As he had stormed into the strategium behind Corax, he too had come to a halt, confused by the absence of foes.

'Not here,' was the only answer Corax could give.

His gaze was drawn to a shape swaddled in bloodied robes, pierced by many pipes and cables, at the heart of the strategium. The figure's corpse-like thinness showed her human skeleton despite the profusion of implanted machinery. All that could be seen of her face was a slack mouth showing a few broken, yellowed teeth, the rest of her head encased in a many-faceted helm of ceramite into which passed dozens of coiled filaments.

Corax descended the steps to the main hall, his footsteps resounding across the quiet murmuring of the servitors and the buzz of poorly shielded circuits. To Corax's amazement, the woman stirred. She raised her head as though looking at him, a small black gem fixed to the brow of the enclosing helm.

'Release me,' she whispered. Blood-flecked saliva drooled from between cracked lips, a dark tongue lolling across raw gums. 'I can serve no more.'

'We are not your captors,' Corax told the woman as he stopped beside her. Now, closer, he saw the glint of silver thread in the tatters of her clothes. The patterns were broken, but taken together the remnants revealed the woman to be a Navigator. 'I am Corax, of the Raven Guard.'

'Corax…' She breathed the name and her lips twisted into a hideous smile. 'Grant me my death. You are the Lord of Deliverance and I need delivering from this torment.'

The primarch moved one of his energy-sheathed claws towards the Navigator, but he hesitated before granting her wish. It tore at his conscience, but a harder part of him – the part that had sent atomic charges into the cities of Kiavahr to kill thousands of innocents, and allowed him to pacify worlds resisting compliance – stayed his hand.

'Soon, I promise you, but first I have need of answers,' he told her. The Navigator slumped, causing the pipes and wires to rattle fiercely like the twitching of a grotesque puppet's strings.

Before Corax could begin his questioning he diverted his attention to the vox-net, distracted by an exchange between Branne and Agapito on the command channel.

'*We can't break through here,*' Branne was saying. '*You were supposed to flank the forces defending the reactor, brother.*'

'*I will be with you shortly,*' Agapito replied, breathing heavily. '*One of the bastards fled, the coward. We'll have him cornered soon.*'

From long acquaintance Corax could sense Branne holding his temper in check, with some effort.

'*Reactor readings are reaching critical,*' the commander eventually responded. '*The reactor will reach meltdown if we do not seize control of it. We can deal with the Word Bearers once the ship is secure.*'

'Agapito, what is causing your delay?' the primarch demanded, irritated by the commander's tardiness in completing his mission.

'*I...*' Agapito's voice trailed away. When he spoke again a moment later, there was contrition in his voice. '*Apologies, Lord Corax. We will make all haste to the reactor chamber.*'

'As you should have already, commander. We will speak of this later.'

'*Yes, Lord Corax. Forgive my distraction.*'

'If we are still alive in ten minutes, I will consider it,' Corax replied. He knelt down next to the imprisoned Navigator and spoke gently. 'I am sorry, but I must attend to another matter first. Be strong.'

He stood up and turned to Soukhounou.

‘See what you can do to slow the reactor overload from here,’ the primarch said, pointing to the engineering station where a rheumy-eyed servitor murmured a monologue of status reports. ‘I want this ship taken intact.’

Warning lights glared red along the corridors surrounding the plasma-core chamber. The accompanying sirens had been cut off abruptly from the strategium, but the ruddy gloom was a reminder to Commander Branne that the ship was far from secured.

‘Cavall, Nerror, Hok,’ Branne called out to three nearby sergeants. ‘Flank right, one deck up.’

Their squads peeled away to a stairwell as Branne led the rest of the company forwards. The waves of grotesque ship slaves had ceased for the moment, no doubt pulled back to form a last defence around the overloading reactor. Branne did not know whether that was a final act of spite from the Word Bearers, or to prevent the Raven Guard discovering the crew’s purpose in the sector. He did know that Lord Corax had issued no warning of an evacuation, and within the next one hundred and twenty seconds it would be too late for the boarding parties to escape the doomed ship.

Branne’s Raptors were fighting well and he felt a moment of pride as he watched them sweeping along the engineering deck, efficient and deadly. They had been fully blooded at the Perfect Fortress, and in later engagements against the forces of the Death Guard at Monettan, and in the seizing of several traitor Imperial Army warships that had been intercepted during an attack at Tholingeist. With each battle they gained valuable experience.

Now they had been transformed from instinctively superior fighters to disciplined, effective warriors. Even those that had been twisted by the later gene-seed mutations had surpassed their bodily difficulties, fighting as equals amongst their clean-limbed brothers. Branne had become so familiar with his charges that he barely noticed the deformities that marred them. They were all simply his Raptors, though he knew that there were others in the Legion who did not wholly trust them.

The feeling of pride passed, to be replaced by an ever-present sense of profound responsibility. The Raptors, both the perfectly formed and those that had suffered the body-altering mutations, were a new generation of Raven Guard: the future of the Legion, Lord Corax had called them. The primarch certainly had no qualms about utilising the Raptors’ abilities, enhanced by their improved Mark VI armour systems. As Corax had promised, the Raptors were treated as any other fighting force from Deliverance, given ample opportunity to prove themselves worthy as legionaries.

A huge detonation ahead shattered Branne’s contemplation. For a split second he thought the plasma wards had been breached, his Raptor squads silhouetted against the sheet of white fire erupting along walls and floor, creating a stark vignette.

The instant passed as the fire washed over Branne for several seconds. Temperature warning alerts rang in his ear but his suit’s systems were more than a match for the flames, dumping coolant from the armour’s power plant into the secondary systems. Paint blistered and bubbled and thick sweat ran from Branne’s pores, but no lasting damage was done. The conflagration passed in moments, leaving the commander to assess the damage.

‘What was that?’ he demanded, striding forwards. Ahead of him the Raptors closer to the blast had not fared so well. The broken remains of a handful of his warriors lay at the top of the stairwell where the explosion had originated.

The surviving Raptors picked themselves up and regained their senses.

‘Improvised charge, commander,’ reported Sergeant Chayvan. ‘A shell from a close-defence turret, I think.’

‘Self-terminating strike,’ added Streckel, one of Chayvan’s warriors. ‘It was being carried by one of the

slaves. Insane bastard.'

'What have they got to lose?' replied Branne as he reached the stairs. The steps had been turned to dripping slag a dozen metres below him, the walls spattered with droplets of molten plasteel. 'Stay vigilant. There will be more of them. I want them taken out before they can self-detonate.'

Affirmatives rang across the vox-net as Branne looked up the shaft. The flight of stairs to the upper deck had been incinerated, stranding the commander and his companions below the entryway to the main plasma-conduit chambers. He glanced at the chronometer.

Eighty seconds left. Still there had been no word from Lord Corax.

The Raptors fanned out through the corridors, auspex scanners sweeping for a stair or conveyor. There was no effort wasted on mourning the fallen; everyone knew that they would share the same fate if they could not stop the reactor overload.

There was a calm, measured fatalism about the Raptors that Branne found reassuring. Perhaps it was something about the nature of their founding, or maybe his own outlook that had shaped their demeanour. Whatever the cause, he considered the members of his company to be amongst the most sober of the XIX Legion – youthful exuberance had quickly given way to deep gravitas in the light of galactic civil war and the very likely possibility that the Raptors might be the last generation of Raven Guard to become legionaries.

Branne knew that his company would always be a step aside from the rest of the Raven Guard, despite the primarch's words and the platitudes of the other senior officers. They were different not just physically, but in temperament also. It was nothing new. There had always been subtle divisions amongst the warriors of the Legion. There were the Terrans, who had fought alongside the Emperor himself, their legacy traced back to the start of the Great Crusade. Yet despite their proud heritage, the Terrans had never shared the same intimate bond with Lord Corax enjoyed by those who had fought for the salvation of Deliverance. The ex-prisoners, Branne amongst the many thousands who had taken part in the uprising, had taken Corax as one of their own, first as protectors and then as followers. The Terrans treated Corax with awe and respect as their gene-father, but their entire history with him was as the Emperor's warrior-servants, never as equals.

Now the Raptors were added to the mix. They all shared two common experiences: they had been inducted into the Legion after the treachery of Horus had been revealed, and they had not suffered through the massacre at the dropsite and subsequent running battles. It was this that set them apart from both Deliverance-born and Terran. They were not warriors of the Great Crusade; they had a darker but no less vital purpose. The Raptors were trained not for the pacification of non-compliant worlds nor the eradication of alien foes, but for the simple task of destroying other Space Marines.

The Isstvan survivors were still haunted by their experience, either by anger or guilt, bearing a burden of loss that Branne could never share. Perhaps this was why Corax had chosen Branne to lead the newest recruits, sensing he would share an affinity with this untainted generation that he could never wholly regain with the massacre survivors. It would be typical of Corax's wisdom and his keen insight into the minds of his warriors.

'Enemy contacts, several hundred,' reported Sergeant Klaverin from one of the lead squads. 'More than a dozen Word Bearers leading the defence, commander.'

'Acknowledged. Eliminate all resistance. Access to the plasma chamber is highest priority.'

Agapito hacked down another foe, the gleaming blade of his power sword slicing through flesh that was mottled a pale blue, the crewman's strangely canine face splitting from brow to chin. The commander turned his next blow against a slave-mutant with bulging eyes and a forked tongue, driving the blade into

the hideous creature's chest.

'One hundred metres more!' he barked, swinging his sword to urge on the Raven Guard around him.

There had been only a handful of Word Bearers between Agapito and the reactor chamber, but that did not make progress any easier. Perhaps wishing to end their miserable lives, the deformed crew had flooded into the aft sections of the ship, using themselves as a barrier to prevent the Raven Guard accessing the reactor chamber. It was no spiteful scheme of the slaves to take the boarding parties with them, but a calculated sacrifice by the Word Bearers. The critical state of the plasma reactor could only be possible if they had started to push it into overdrive the moment that they had been discovered.

Across the vox-net Agapito heard the reports of other squads advancing to link up with Branne and his Raptors, attempting to force a coherent line through the mass of defenders so that a concerted effort could be made on the conduit chambers and engine rooms.

There had been no thought of retreat, and no intimation that they should abandon the ship. Intelligence was key to the war being waged by the Raven Guard; knowledge of where the enemy were weakest and where they were strong was essential to the strategy of Corax. The ship was too valuable to lose and Agapito fought like a berserker from the XII Legion to atone for his earlier distraction.

Eventually the Raven Guard ploughed through the press of defenders, the corridor thick with dismembered bodies behind them as they reached the passageway leading to the main reactor vault. Agapito detailed two squads to stand rearguard and led the rest, some seventy warriors, directly for the reactor control room.

An emergency blast door barred their path at the end of the corridor, but three well-placed melta bombs from the Talons blew a hole through it large enough for the armoured legionaries to pass into the heart of the engine decks.

Sergeant Chovani was the first through, just ahead of Agapito.

'Hold fire!' the sergeant barked, lifting his bolter out of the firing position.

Ahead of them was a Raptor squad – not fine-limbed warriors in their battleplate, but the twisted unfortunates that had survived the later gene-seed implantations by the primarch. Some were wrapped in robes, too bulky even to wear power armour. Others could still wear their suits, albeit with extensive modification.

Agapito could not help but compare the late-generation Raptors with the slave-mutants he had been slaying. Scaled skin, inhuman eyes, clawed hands, clumps of wiry hair and nodules of bone and cartilage disfigured the Raven Guard warriors. Their sergeant had a hunched look; he was still able to wear armour, but elongated ears and a ridge of bone across his brow could not be encompassed by a helm. All the skin that Agapito could see, whether furred or smooth, lizard-like or broken with warty growths, was almost white in colour. They all had jet black hair and the comparison to the bleached flesh and black eyes of Lord Corax was unavoidable.

For all their physical similarities with the ship slaves, the Raptors could not have been more different in poise and attitude. They were guarding a stairwell, attentive and alert, holding themselves up with as much bearing as their warped frames allowed. All of the physical abuses heaped upon them could not mask the pride and strength of their legionary training, but their appearance still unsettled Agapito, especially in comparison to the monstrosities created by the Word Bearers. Thinking on that did not entirely make the existence of the deformed Raptors easy to accept.

'Commander Agapito,' the sergeant said, bowing his head in a deferential greeting. His lips were thin and revealed dark gums and tongue as he spoke, but his voice was calm and quiet, with a youthful pitch. 'Commander Branne is securing the reactor chamber as we speak.

'You are?' asked Agapito.

‘Sergeant Hef, commander. Navar Hef.’

‘Link up with my Talons, Navar,’ said Agapito, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder towards the remnants of the door. ‘I think the enemy are broken, but there may be enough of them left to try some kind of counter-attack.’

‘Techmarines are securing the plasma wards right now, commander,’ said Hef. ‘Commander Branne said to pass word for you to meet him in the main chamber.’

I’m sure he did, thought Agapito, but out loud said, ‘Very well, sergeant. Carry on.’

Agapito turned his attention to the trio of sergeants who had joined him, awaiting their orders.

‘Lock the whole area down and link up with any other Raptors,’ he told them. ‘Nothing passes the line.’

The commander was already turning away, thoughts moving back to Branne as the sergeants voiced affirmatives and returned to their squads. The route to the main reactor took Agapito up one deck, passing two more Raptor squads guarding the stairwells, and along a short corridor. The area was well within the perimeter and he sheathed his sword and holstered his pistol as he neared the reactor chamber.

Branne met him at the doorway, stepping into the passage as Agapito strode towards the chamber, no doubt informed of his fellow commander’s approach. Branne said nothing at first, but stepped past to address the squad of Raven Guard at the end of the corridor.

‘This area is secure, move down three decks,’ Branne ordered. There were a few glances at the two commanders – it was clear that they were not being moved on for strategic reasons – but the legionaries departed without comment. The ring of their boots on the metal steps grew fainter.

‘Brother, I am s–’

Branne grabbed the lip of his brother’s breastplate in a fist and thrust Agapito against the wall.

‘Sorry is not good enough!’ Though Agapito could see nothing of his brother’s expression inside his helm, Branne’s posture and voice conveyed his rage as purposefully as any snarl or frown. ‘Our orders were simple. What happened to you?’

‘I was killing Word Bearers, brother,’ Agapito replied, trying to keep calm against Branne’s rage. ‘That’s what we do now. We kill traitors.’

Agapito moved to step out of Branne’s grasp but his brother shoved him back against the wall once more, cracking the rough plaster with the impact.

‘One minute,’ rasped Branne. ‘One more minute and we would all be dead.’

‘Do you value your life so highly?’ asked Agapito, lashing out with his words, stung by the arrogance of Branne to appoint himself as judge. ‘Perhaps you should have fought harder.’

Branne raised a gauntleted fist, arm trembling, but he did not strike the blow.

‘Corax is on this ship, brother. Did you not think of him while you were pursuing your personal revenge against the Word Bearers?’

This time Agapito did not make any attempt to control his anger. He smashed Branne’s arm aside and pushed him away, almost sending him to the deck.

‘Personal revenge? Seventy thousand of our brothers died on Isstvan Five. Do you think it is only me that desires to avenge them? And what of the other Legions? The Salamanders and the Iron Hands? Ferrus Manus was slain, probably Lord Vulkan too. Lord Corax? I watched those bastards Lorgar and Curze try to kill him while you were on the other side of the galaxy, so do not tell me that *I* put the primarch in danger.’

Branne stepped away, shaking his head.

‘You disobeyed orders. A direct command from the primarch. Is that what has become of you?’ The anger in his voice had become sorrow. ‘You cannot change what happened on Isstvan. Our dead brothers would not thank you for jeopardising a mission for their memory.’

‘What would you know?’ snapped Agapito. He tapped the side of his helmet with a finger. ‘You don’t have the same memories as me. You were not there, brother.’

‘A fate that you never fail to mention when given the chance,’ Branne said with a sigh. He pointed to the grey sigil that could barely be seen against the black of Agapito’s left pauldron. ‘The campaign honour for Isstvan that your Talons wear is a mark of respect for the fallen, not a badge of shame. Many died there. You did not. Be thankful. You have nothing to atone for.’

‘I am not trying to atone,’ said Agapito. He could not find the words to express the mixture of feelings that swirled inside him when he thought about the Dropsite Massacre. He gave up and turned away from his brother. ‘I do not blame you for your absence, brother, but you will never understand.’

The ravaged face of the Navigator turned towards Corax as he laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

‘Constanix,’ she whispered. ‘That is the system you seek. Now, please, release me from this bondage.’

Delving into his encyclopaedic memory, Corax recalled that Constanix II was a forge world less than fifty light years from their current position. Its allegiance in the civil war that had engulfed the Imperium was unknown, but the fact that the Word Bearers had been there, or were heading there at all, did not bode well.

‘What purpose do the traitors have there?’ he asked softly.

‘I do not know. Twice we have travelled to the system, since we escaped from Calth and dared the Ruinstorm.’

‘Ruinstorm?’ Corax had not heard the term before.

‘The tumult of the warp,’ wheezed the Navigator. ‘It is an artifice of Lorgar’s followers. They did this to me, infected me with… Turned my mind into a vessel for one of their inhuman allies to guide–’

‘Lord Corax, the ship is secured,’ announced Soukhounou. The commander had removed his helm, and a sheen of sweat across his dark skin glistened in the amber lights of the reactor displays. He ran a hand through short, curled black hair, his relief evident. His smile twisted the pale scars etched into his face; tribal tattoos that marked him out as a former praise-singer of the Sahelian League on Terra. ‘Plasma containment stabilised. Commanders Branne and Agapito are coming to the strategium to report.’

Corax nodded but did not reply, his attention returning to the broken Navigator.

‘This thing they placed inside you – is it still there?’

‘It fled.’ The Navigator shuddered and gasped, the cables and pipes piercing her flesh rattling and swaying as her whole body twitched at the thought. Still blinded by her mask, she nevertheless looked up at Corax, jaw clenched. ‘I know what you will ask of me.’

‘It is not necessary,’ said Corax. He moved his hand so that the tip of one of his claws was millimetres from her throat, just below the chin. ‘Our own Navigators can take us to Constanix.’

‘The powers entreated by the Word Bearers keep watch on the system. They will block you. They know the *Kamiel*, this ship, and I can take you through their wards.’ She drew in a long, ragged breath. ‘I will endure for a while longer to see the works of my tormentors ended. The malice their abuse of me has brought forth is thwarted by your efforts. The Emperor would expect nothing less.’

‘I will have my Apothecaries tend to you, as best they can.’

‘The wounds of my body are the least severe injuries I have suffered. Your Apothecaries can do nothing for the agonies heaped upon my soul. Only death will cleanse the taint.’ The Navigator straightened further, giving a glimpse of the poise and elegance she must have once possessed before the cruel attentions of the traitors had debased her. ‘I am Sagitha Alons Neortallin, and I will serve the lord of the Raven Guard as my last act.’

Corax withdrew his lightning claw and stood up. Stepping back, he bowed his head in acknowledgement

of Sagitha's sacrifice.

'By such spirit and courage as yours will Horus be defeated. You will be honoured.'

The tramp of boots on the deck above caught Corax's attention and he turned to see Branne and Agapito at the rail of the balcony. He gestured to Soukhounou to accompany him as he made his way up the steps. The Raven Guard who stood sentry by the strategium's portal needed no instruction to depart, silently moving away to leave their commanders free to talk.

'The Word Bearers have some link to the forge world of Constanix Two,' Corax told the others. 'For the moment we can only guess what fresh nightmares they concoct there.'

'A dilemma,' said Soukhounou. He looked at Branne and Agapito, whose silence betrayed fresh tension between them. 'The fleet is ready to attack the traitors on Euesa, but it will not be a swift campaign. Whatever the Word Bearers plan for Constanix may come to fruition while we wage war on Fulgrim's disciples.'

'Commander Aloni and the Therions will be expecting us to reinforce their assault on Euesa – we cannot leave them unsupported,' countered Branne. 'All manner of trouble could await us at this forge world and substantially delay our arrival.'

'The obvious victory is on Euesa,' said Corax, 'for if we can rid that world of the traitors' influence the whole Vandreggan Reach will likely remain loyal to the Emperor. But I do not like the Word Bearers' machinations. Constanix is strategically insignificant, a minor forge world in the scheme of the Imperium. Had the world been more prominent their purpose would be clearer, but the seizing of Constanix will do little to aid Horus's war effort. I do not like mysteries.'

'Any mission that sees more traitors dead is a worthwhile mission,' said Agapito. 'Lord Corax, we do not need all of our forces at Euesa. Let me lead some of my Talons to Constanix and the Word Bearers' plans will be halted for certain.'

'Our Legion is small enough,' Branne argued, shaking his head. 'Dividing our forces now would weaken us further.'

'So it's your plan to allow the Word Bearers free rein to wreak more destruction?' snapped Agapito. He mastered his anger and turned to Corax, his tone almost pleading. 'Lord, the traitors must be faced down at every turn, and the damage inflicted to the Emperor's cause by the Word Bearers could be considerable if left unchecked. They spread hatred of Terra as surely as they once proclaimed their loyalty. Constanix will not be the last world they try to corrupt if we allow them to escape.'

'I have no intention of ignoring the Word Bearers,' replied the primarch.

'But the attack on Euesa–'

Corax's raised hand silenced Branne's protest. 'Soukhounou, what is your appraisal?'

'Forgive me, Lord Corax, but I am sure you have already made a decision,' Soukhounou said with a shrug. 'I do not think my counsel will sway you to another course.'

'You do not have an opinion?'

'I believe it is still your intent that we should bring punishment to the rebels wherever they are encountered, lord. We should attack the foe both at Euesa and at Constanix. Or at the least, the Word Bearers' activities should be investigated and assessed.'

'Although Agapito may have a different motivation for wishing to pursue the Word Bearers, I approve of his strategy,' said the primarch. He turned away from his commanders and looked across the strategium. They came up beside him, remaining silent for his orders. 'The enemy at Euesa are well scouted and well known. Branne, Soukhounou, you are more than capable of leading the campaign with Aloni. I have every confidence that you will earn another victory for the Legion.'

'You will not be coming with us?' Branne was taken aback by the pronouncement.

‘My presence will be more useful with Agapito at Constanix. We shall take three hundred warriors only. Judging by the remnants of the Word Bearers that were left on this ship, we should not expect a large contingent of them to be waiting for us.’

‘And if Constanix has fallen to our enemies?’ said Soukhounou. ‘It may be a minor forge world but they will still have many thousands of Mechanicum soldiers and war machines.’

‘If opposition proves insurmountable, we shall do what we always do.’

‘Attack, withdraw and attack again,’ chorused the commanders after a moment’s pause.

‘Just so,’ Corax told them with a smile. He paused, retrieving what he knew of the forge world from the depths of his mind. ‘I shall take this vessel, recrewed from our own ships, to ensure our arrival goes unseen. Agapito, detail two hundred legionaries to accompany us. Soukhounou, I will need one hundred more of your auxiliary vehicle crews, armed as assault troops. Constanix is dominated by acidic oceans, with few sizeable land masses. There are eight major atmospheric cities kept aloft by anti-grav technologies, so we will need to think aerially. I need warriors trained with flight and jump packs, plus a full complement of Thunderhawks, Shadowhawks, Stormbirds, Fire Raptor gunships and whatever smaller assault craft the fleet can spare and will fit into the launch bays. And a team from the armoury. The *Kamiel*’s warp engines and other major systems need to be repaired quickly if our strike is to be timely. If we can defeat the Word Bearers with this force, all will be well. If not… Well, the Legion will have its next target.’

The commanders nodded and agreed. With a gesture, Corax despatched them to their duties but called out as they reached the main doors.

‘And Agapito, it is at least seven days’ journey to Constanix. You and I will have plenty of time to discuss your actions today.’

The Talons’ commander seemed to sag inside his armour.

‘Yes, Lord Corax,’ Agapito replied.

TWO

The Shadowhawk slid silently down through the night, its black hull almost invisible against the thick clouds that blotted out the light of moons and stars. Thermal dampening vanes jutted from its cunningly faceted, oily black canopy, the drop-craft looking like a huge, broad-winged spiny beetle. Just a few dozen metres below, foam flecked the acidic seas of Constanix II, lit by the bioluminescence of indigenous bacteria. In the distance, several kilometres from the Shadowhawk's glide path, the navigation lights of multi-hull trawlers glinted and strobed, their red and green flashes almost lost in the deluge of rain that pattered from the drop-ship's hull. Bright wakes churned behind the ships as they ploughed back and forth, their reinforced scoop keels dredging thousands of tonnes of rich organic material for the Mechanicum's processors and bio-laboratories.

Two kilometres ahead, floating half a kilometre above the ocean, the barge-city of Atlas drifted through the downpour, smoke and steam from its furnace-houses and foundries leaving a ruddy trail in its wake. A red glare from scores of manufactories and smelteries illuminated the heart of the seventeen-kilometre-wide edifice. Cranes and booms with amber lamps arrayed along their length sprawled from the wharfs that ringed Atlas, their orange glows little more than pinpricks in the darkness.

Between the light of the docks and the fiery aura of the city's centre lay a gloom of smog and lightlessness. It was towards this that the Shadowhawk glided, with only the breeze whispering from its wingtips to betray its presence. The pilot guided the craft into a steep climb that turned into a swift dive, bypassing the bright quaysides and seeking the shelter of the shrouded city streets.

The quiet hum of anti-grav motors rose as the stealth lander pitched towards an area of waste ground strewn with slag heaps and the acid-scarred skeletons of ancient machines. The smog swirled heavily as it landed, the Shadowhawk nestling neatly between a great pile of discarded engine parts and a slope of rubble-littered spoil.

Swathed by darkness, the ramp at the rear of the drop-ship eased open. There was no light from within and the black-clad figures that emerged made barely a sound. Morphic treads on their boots muted their footfalls as ten Raven Guard legionaries fanned out into a perimeter around their craft. Ducking through the opening, Corax followed, his armour the colour of raven feathers, the white skin of his face obscured behind a layer of black camouflage. In his youth he had hidden his flesh with the soot of Lycaeus's furnaces; these days a more sophisticated compound he had developed with the Mechanicum of Kiavahr

served even better.

He spoke a few words, the syllables barely heard. Even had some casual observer been close enough to hear, they would have made no sense of what had been said. The primarch's voice was a combination of wind-whispers and delicate sighs, almost indistinguishable from the keening of the breeze across the wasteland; the stalk-argot of the Legion, with which basic commands could be issued in total secrecy.

Falling into pairs, the Raven Guard spread out further while Corax made his way towards the closest buildings. The wasteland, perhaps ten hectares broad, was surrounded on three sides by high tenements. Though taller and reinforced with plasteel columns, the buildings bore a resemblance to the work habitats of Kiavahr; but the razorwire-topped fences and barred windows reminded him more of the prison complexes on Lycaeus, and the memory stirred distaste in the primarch. Feeble yellow light glowed from a handful of slit-like windows on the upper storeys, but the Raven Guard had chosen the darkest part of night to make their insertion – between midnight and dawn, when the work teams would be sound asleep in their exhaustion – and he could hear no sounds of activity.

The fourth edge of the waste ground petered out into a ferrocrete yard adjoining the empty shell of a sprawling factory. The site appeared to have been stripped of anything useful but for the walls of the buildings themselves. It was easy to conclude that Constanix II had been isolated, unable to ship in the raw materials needed for its manufactories due to the Ruinstorm and the other effects of the civil war spreading across the galaxy. The Mechanicum rulers had taken to cannibalising their own, though to what end Corax did not yet know. He was determined to find out.

Issuing an order to his warriors to guard the landing zone, and to use non-lethal force against any intruders, if possible, the primarch set off alone towards the empty factory. Beyond the grey slab walls he could see the central temple of the Mechanicum priesthood soaring up from the heart of the city, a three-hundred-metre-high ziggurat structure. Secondary turrets and bastions broke its outline and curving accessways and lifting engines further crowded its stepped levels. At the summit burned a white flame surrounded by smaller fires, massive chimneys looking like ceremonial braziers from this distance.

Clear of the wasteland, Corax headed directly through the abandoned manufactorum. The wind keened through empty windows and across half-collapsed mezzanines. The darkness was no obstacle to the primarch and he navigated across desolate spaces that had once been assembly chambers. Even the doors to the overseers' offices had been taken, creating a vast, cavernous interior. Cracked ferrocrete separated the various work sheds, here and there covered with patches of lichen and stunted plants.

Corax realised that the rain that had fallen on the Shadowhawk since breaching the cloud layer did not blanket the city as it did the seas. Looking up at the low clouds, he could see just the faintest blur of a weather-shield protecting Atlas from the elements. It was likely not the only energy defence possessed by the barge city. Even so, the air was thick with humidity, the acrid taste bringing to mind the chemical-tainted air of an ice refinery.

The complex extended for about a kilometre – a distance quickly covered by the primarch's long strides. Coming out of the other side of the buildings, he discovered a broad roadway that marked the inner perimeter of the factory site, potholes and wide welts in the surface showing that the poor maintenance extended beyond the manufactorum. There were no street lamps, but dim light trickled from the windows of the surrounding tenements, which rose up on either side like the walls of a ravine.

The quiet was unlike any forge world he had ever seen. Normally the Mechanicum ran their production lines day and night, shift after shift of tech-priests and labourers toiling for the glory of their Machine-God. Atlas was almost silent, starved of the ore and other materials it needed, the only sound the background electrical buzz of generators feeding the worker habs.

The primarch was here to gather intelligence, but he was at a loss for a moment regarding where to find

the information he desired. The stealthy entry of the Shadowhawk had precluded any form of close-range scan that might have been picked up by the local sensor grid, so his first priority was to establish the general layout and strategic disposition of the city. Equally important was the need to find out whether the ruling elite of the Mechanicum were aligned to the Word Bearers, or if the forge world had simply suffered attack from the *Kamiel*.

The first would be a simple matter of navigating the city from one side to the other. Corax's superior mind could catalogue every-thing he saw in minute detail, taking account of side routes, elevations, firing positions, choke points and everything else he needed to know. The second was a far more difficult proposition and would require either careful first-hand observation or interaction with some of the locals. For both, time was limited. He did not know when the morning labour shift would begin, but it would be within a few hours.

Corax took a pace out onto the roadway and then stopped. Someone was watching him.

He scanned the soaring blocks around him and spied a silhouette at one of the lighted windows. It was a woman, but her back was turned. She was holding a fussing child, patting him gently on the back as he gazed down wide-eyed at the giant warrior.

I am not here, Corax thought, drawing on the inner power he had to cloud his presence from the perception of others. Just as it had once worked on prison guards and traitors, his innate ability shifted him from the conscious thoughts of the child, who shook his head in confusion and then laid his cheek upon his mother's shoulder, content.

Though powerful, his ability was not without limit. It would be better to seek a less observed route into the city. Still cloaked by his aura of misdirection, Corax activated his flight pack. Metal-feathered wings extended with a soft whirr. He took two steps and leapt into the air, the flight pack lifting him up into the smog that shrouded the rooftops of the tenements.

Alighting on the flat summit of the closest, Corax broke into a run, eyes scanning left and right to take in the layout of the city as he sprinted along the wall at the roof's edge. Another bound took him across the road, gliding silently through the darkness like a bat.

From building to building he roamed, criss-crossing the tightly packed worker blocks as he made his way towards the heart of Atlas. Amongst the run-down slums he noticed a patch of light smeared in the fumes that blanketed the city. On artificial wings, he steered his way towards the illumination, dropping down between the hab-blocks to settle on a metal walkway overlooking the scene.

Below was a low, squat Mechanicum temple, much smaller than the main ziggurat. In shape it was a truncated pyramid, three storeys high, with yellow light spilling from arched windows that cast shadows of the skull-cog sigil of the Machine-God into the haze. Girder-like iron columns ran up the walls, becoming a vaulted scaffolding above the summit of the temple. Here brass and silver icons hung from heavy chains, glinting in the glow of forge-fire cast up from skylights in the roof, half-hidden in the polluted swirl from a dozen short chimney stacks.

The murmuring of voices, muted by thick walls, came to the primarch's ears and from his vantage point he watched cowled figures moving past the windows on the upper storey. He left his perch and skimmed through the smog, aiming for the arched metalwork above one of the grand windows. Grasping hold of the pitted metal, he furled his wings and leaned closer.

The storey was a single chamber; at its heart a furnace burned, its shutter doors wide open to spill heat and light across the gathered tech-priests. Corax counted five standing in a group to his right, while shovel-handed servitors plodded back and forth from a fuel chute to the left, feeding the sacred fires of the Omnissiah with pale fuel cubes.

Corax looked for means of entry and exit, analysing the tactical situation. The engine and cage of a

conveyor stood not far from the window and a spiral staircase on the far side of the chamber led up to the temple roof and down to the lower levels. The five tech-priests were close to each other, a single target group, and with the conveyor carriage already on this floor only the furnace-servitors offered any potential additional threat – and they looked like monotasks, incapable of performing any other action.

The ruddy walls of the temple room were adorned with inlaid precious metals wrought into alchemical sigils and formulae, sprawling equations displayed as holy texts. Centred on the furnace, the tiled floor was inlaid with an obsidian-like stone in the shape of a large gear, diamonds fashioned as skulls set into the black material on each of the twelve lugs.

Much of the room was filled with a clutter of ancient brass instruments on stands and altar-tables. Astrolabes and quadrants were set out on velvet cloths, alongside torquetums and complex orreries. Ornately etched theodolites stood in front of shelves full of alembics and spectrographs, barometers and microscopes, magnetographs and oscilloscopes, las-callipers and nanocouplers. Some were clearly replicas of far more ancient technologies, others appeared to be in functioning order. There seemed to be no pattern to the collection; a random conglomeration of artefacts of no use to the tech-priests' work but kept in this museum out of reverence as artifices of the Machine-God.

The hoods of the Mechanicum priests swathed their faces in shadow, but the glassaic was not so thick that it barred their words from reaching the primarch. Their low voices set the window's surface vibrating just enough for his keen ears to pick up every word, now that he was close.

'This latest call for our resources cannot be ignored,' one of the tech-priests said. A claw-handed cybernetic arm protruded from his left sleeve, gleaming in the furnace-light. 'Vangellin made it clear that if we did not liquidate the Third District then he would remove us and see us condemned to servitude.'

'Would he really turn the skitarii against his own?' asked another. Corax identified the owner: a tall, barrel-chested individual with sapphire-like lenses shining in the shadow of his cowl.

'More than skitarii… if the rumours from Iapetus… are to be believed,' said a third. His breathing was laboured, the front of his robe open around a whirring, pumping machine set into his torso. Each time he spoke, pistons in the artificial lung clattered. 'The words may come… from Vangellin, but we know… the command originates with… Archmagos Delvere. He has the support of… the Cognoscenti… and so we must obey.'

'Delvere speaks the words of another.' This fourth voice was artificial; clipped and metallic. 'The Word Bearer Nathrakin shares equal blame. He is not to be trusted.'

'Trust is irrelevant,' said the second tech-priest. 'Force wins all arguments.'

'The Cognoscenti have not decreed such,' said the fifth member of the group. He was short, no more than a metre and a half tall, his back cruelly bent and the hunch further exaggerated by a sprawl of pipes curving from his spine to canisters around his waist. 'The skitarii are loyal but they will not follow blindly to act against their masters.'

'It is folly to contemplate armed resistance,' said the first tech-priest. 'What have we to lose by compliance? The Word Bearers bring assurances from Mars. Delvere follows the will of the Fabricator General.'

'Such assurances… can be easily… falsified. The Word Bearers seek… to defy the Omnissiah. Their creations are… abhorrent. We cannot support this in good… conscience.'

'It is not like you, Firax, to be so dismissive of learning,' said the first voice. 'Lord Nathrakin has opened our research to areas we thought impossible. Are these new creations any more abhorrent than what we do for Geller fields and warp drives?'

'Azor Nathrakin is a liar,' said the metallic voice. 'Pure knowledge resides not in the alternate but in the reality we inhabit. He has corrupted Archmagos Delvere's thinking.'

‘I will not be part of this rebellion,’ said the first tech-priest, turning away.

‘Lacrymenthis… do not be hasty,’ Firax called out as the recalcitrant tech-priest headed towards the conveyor cage.

‘A rebellion against rebels,’ said the stunted one. ‘Surely a contradiction. A paradox.’

The primarch caught the look in the eyes of the dissident priest as he opened the doors of the cage. He saw conviction and defiance in that gaze and knew in an instant that he meant to betray his companions. He had seen that look in the eyes of other traitors.

He acted instantly, crashing through the window into the temple, showering broken glassaic and leading into the room. Before the tech-priests reacted he was next to the departing adept. The primarch thrust out a hand, tempering his strength so that the blow merely knocked the semi-mechanical man to the ground rather than pulverising his body.

‘Make no alarm!’ Corax barked at the others, the authority in his voice quelling their instinct to shout out. He continued before the shock of his appearance wore off. ‘I am Corax of the Raven Guard, primarch of the Emperor. We seek a similar end to the Word Bearers’ presence here.’

The servitors continued their monotonous plodding as primarch and tech-priests stared at each other, motionless. In that moment Corax calculated his next attack should the Mechanicum priests oppose him; half a dozen strides and four strikes from his lightning claws would see them all headless in two seconds.

‘The liberator… of Kiavahr,’ wheezed Firax, holding up a gnarled hand in a gesture of peace. ‘On Constanix… no less.’

‘Is he dead?’ asked the priest with sapphire eyes, motioning towards Lacrymenthis’s supine form.

‘Not yet,’ Corax replied, straightening. ‘He knows more than he has told you.’

‘Inquiry,’ said the artificially voiced tech-priest. ‘What brings the Lord of Deliverance to our planet?’

‘My entrance will bring remark from others,’ said Corax, ignoring the question as he glanced back at the shattered window and then to the conveyor. ‘Is this place safe?’

‘There are no… others,’ said the wheezing tech-priest. ‘Just the five here… and mindless servitors. I am Firax, Magos… Biologis of the Third… District. Our demesne has… fallen in favour of late and… our adepts departed.’

‘Loriark,’ said the tech-priest with the metal voice. ‘Cybernetica. Magos Senioris of this temple.’

‘I am the Magos Logistica, Salva Kanar,’ the hunchback told the primarch, pulling back his hood to reveal a misshapen, wart-marked face. He pointed at the fallen tech-priest. ‘That one is Lacrymenthis, our Cogitatoris Regular. I always thought him a lackey of Delvere, never liked him.’

Corax turned his attention to the sapphire-lensed adept, who appeared to be fixated on the unconscious tech-priest. The adept noticed the silence and looked up at Corax. Shutters blinked rapidly over his blue eyepieces in surprise.

‘Bassili, Primus Cogenitor of the Biologis,’ he said abruptly. He looked back at the downed tech-priest, shaking his head in astonishment, his voice an awed whisper. ‘Lacrymenthis was augmented well, yet you felled him as easily as an infant.’

‘I am a primarch,’ Corax answered simply. ‘He is just a man. Do you command any forces of note?’

‘Some skitarii commanders may still answer to me,’ said Loriark.

‘More may heed… the word of a… primarch,’ added Firax. ‘You are the essence… of the Omnissiah given form. Perhaps… even Delvere will… heed your words when our… protestations fall on uncaring… ears.’

‘If your archmagos shares counsel with the Word Bearers, I have no words for him,’ said Corax, lifting up a lightning claw. ‘Only deeds.’

‘Then what need have you of our warriors, when the Legion of the Raven Guard awaits your command?’

asked Loriark.

The question surprised Corax, causing him a moment's pause. He saw expectation in the faces of the tech-priests – those whose faces were capable of movement. Loriark's was simply a steel mask, with a respirator grille and eye holes behind which blackened orbs regarded the primarch without emotion.

'I have enough legionaries with me for the task,' said Corax. 'The remainder of my Legion prosecutes the war against Horus on other worlds.'

'And how do you propose to bring Delvere to account?' asked Loriark, his words implacable, and though the monotone irritated Corax the truth of the question vexed him more. 'Your fleet will annihilate Iapetus from orbit?'

'No,' Corax replied vehemently. That he had no fleet was irrelevant. 'I will not condemn thousands of innocents to death so swiftly. Our fight is with the archmagos and the Word Bearers, not the people of Constanix. Such brutality is the weapon of our enemies – not the Raven Guard.'

'You showed no such mercy to the men and women of Kiavahr,' said the hunch-backed Kanar.

'A necessary evil, to prevent even more casualties,' Corax replied quietly, shaking his head. 'The threat of greater destruction ended the war. I do not think that Delvere and this Word Bearer commander will be swayed by such measures.'

'Perhaps you will fly to Iapetus tonight and storm the grand temple yourself?' suggested Loriark. His artificial voice made it impossible to judge if he was being sarcastic.

'I might consider the possibility,' the primarch replied. 'Perhaps it would be better to gain control of Atlas first, all things being equal. With the power of a barge-city to command we can confront Delvere on a more even footing.'

Silence followed as the primarch and his potential allies regarded each other. Corax wondered if he could trust these men – half-men. From his experience with the Mechanicum who had come to Kiavahr, he knew that their motives and agenda were different from those of pure flesh and blood. As a group they seemed to be aligned against the archmagos, but individually Corax had no measure of them or their trustworthiness.

Now that he had revealed himself, only two courses presented themselves: make alliance with the priests of this district, or kill them now. Niro Therman, one of Corax's foster mothers on Lycaeus, had lectured the young primarch at length regarding the sanctity of life. Corax was loath to kill out of hand, but far more was at stake than the lives of five tech-priests.

Kanar seemed to have reached the same conclusion, his augmented brain thinking almost as quickly as the primarch's.

'We can only offer our assurances of common cause,' said the magos, his face twisting into a puckered grimace. 'Other than our lives there is no bond we can give you for our good conduct.'

'We have nothing to lose,' grated Loriark. 'Lacrymenthis was correct in one regard: we obey the archmagos or we will be deemed enemy and destroyed. We are not alone. The cities of Pallas and Crius have moved to the southern currents, away from Iapetus, and their magokritarchs have withdrawn from the council of the Cognoscenti. We must presume the other cities are in accord with the archmagos.'

'How many other cities?'

'Five, including the capital. For the moment, Delvere counts Atlas amongst his friends. Magokritarch Vangellin is of the Templum Aetherica, as is the archmagos. Even now, Atlas travels the capital current towards Iapetus.'

Corax absorbed this information, comparing what he heard to what he knew of other Mechanicum societies. No two forge world authorities were ever quite the same, and the specific nature of Constanix II's independent cities had given rise to a confederate arrangement that could be exploited. The archmagos

clearly held the centre of power, but only by the accord of the Cognoscenti, who it seemed were the paramount authorities on each of the barge-cities. Unless the Word Bearers' influence had extended far into the structure of the Mechanicum – unlikely, given that they had been present for only a short while and the tech-priests were traditionally conservative towards any outside interference – it would be possible to regain the world with the removal of Delvere and the Word Bearers.

'Vangellin, your magokritarch, do you think he could be persuaded to align against the archmagos?' Corax asked.

The tech-priests looked at each other, their expressions doubtful.

'Given sufficient leverage… he may be turned against Delvere,' wheezed Firax.

'And the rest of the Cognoscenti, how united will they be in purpose?' asked the primarch. 'Would one be a natural successor to the Archmagos, loyal to our cause?'

'Such matters are complicated,' answered Loriark. 'It is not for flesh to decide, but only to divine the will of the Machine-God.'

Of course it is, thought Corax, mystified that such brilliant minds amongst the Mechanicum still clung to primitive techno-theologies – the tech-guilds of Kiavahr, for all their sins, had never pretended to serve a supernatural power. That the Emperor had been forced to treat with such a superstitious cult was proof of Mars's importance to the Imperium, though; an importance that Corax was being forced to acknowledge at that precise moment.

'Influence is applied through a mixture of promise and threat,' he said aloud, quoting another of his prison mentors. 'What promises does Delvere offer that we can counter?'

'Only one of us can perhaps answer that question,' replied Kanar, gesturing towards the unconscious Lacrymenthis.

'Can you wake him?' asked Corax.

'Easily enough,' said Kanar. The deformed magos crossed the chamber and stooped over his fallen colleague. He reached a hand into the man's hood, fingers passing behind the neck. Lacrymenthis spasmed once, hard enough to lift his whole body from the floor. He continued to shudder slightly, fingers and feet twitching for several moments. His metallic claw scratched across the tiles, leaving three ragged marks.

'Cerebral re-boot,' Kanar said by way of explanation. 'I installed it myself.'

Lacrymenthis opened bloodshot eyes, vacant for a few seconds as they stared at the ceiling. Life returned as he sat up, actuators whirring somewhere inside his body. Corax moved into an attack stance, one hand drawn back, as the tech-priest's gaze met the primarch's.

'Make sure he makes no transmission,' Corax told the others, his deathly stare fixed on Lacrymenthis.

'His signal to the temple circuit interface has been disconnected,' Loriark said. 'No alarm will be raised.'

'Flesh is irrelevant,' said Lacrymenthis, focusing on Corax. 'Threat of physical torture is inconsequential. My pain receptors have been reduced to minimum input.'

'Neural core dump renders coercion unnecessary,' said Kanar. 'Core function downstrip will reveal memory receptacle interfaces. Your cooperation, however gained, is surplus.'

'Memory-core access will haemorrhage organic life processes,' Lacrymenthis protested, flexing his metal hand. 'Catastrophic personality failure would be irreversible. My loyalty to the wishes of the archmagos and magokritarch should not render me subject to total subjectivity termination. I sought to act to the benefit of Third District.'

'And in doing so… acted against the… determined order… of compliance set by… your direct magos superior,' said Firax. He waved a hand towards Corax. 'The prospects of… the Third District's continued… prominence and prosperity… have been altered.'

‘I am capable of altering my perception of the situation also,’ claimed Lacrymenthis. ‘It seems detrimental to the cause of the temple to defy the will of the superior force, but the presence of the primarch adjusts the parameters considerably.’

‘Misfortune for you,’ said Kanar. ‘Should logic dictate that the best interest of Third District be served by your promotion to Magos Superior, you would not hesitate to cross-connect purpose with that of Delvere once more. To change loyalty is proof that further alterations of allegiance may be forthcoming.’

‘I would rather he was not killed, if it could be avoided,’ Corax said, understanding a little of Lacrymenthis’s complaint. When the tech-priest had made his decision to break from his fellows, there had been sense in complying with the archmagos’s demands rather than being replaced by someone else who would simply enact Delvere’s wishes anyway. Corax did not wish to punish ignorance too severely.

The primarch was no stranger to moral compromise. During the uprisings in Lycaeus he had needed every able man and woman for his freedom fighters and not all of the prisoners on the moon had been political internees. Some had been justly convicted murderers, rapists, thieves and wretches of the worst order. The overthrow, of the corrupt regime had meant compromising the punishment – and justice for the victims – of these miscreants, but such was the necessity. In turn, once the techno-cults had been overthrown those that survived had been granted pardon for their deeds during the war, as Corax had been forced to promise them.

To the agents of the Mechanicum, the struggle between the forces of Horus and the Emperor might appear to be a morally ambivalent situation. Horus had done well to win the Fabricator General of Mars to his cause before his betrayal became known, and now it could not be guaranteed whether any individual forge world was a potential ally or enemy of the Raven Guard.

‘Total personality assimilation with the temple will ensure there is no misdirection or falsification,’ announced Loriark. He waved for Kanar and Bassili to seize Lacrymenthis. ‘Precision is ultimate.’

Lacrymenthis made no protest, shoulders sagging inside his heavy robe, resigned to his fate.

‘His datacore will relinquish its secrets over the next few hours, primarch,’ said Kanar. ‘If we hasten the process it could lead to data corruption.’

‘You doubt the strength of our dedication to an alliance, but how are we to know what you intend for the future of our world?’ said Loriark, turning his attention back to Corax. ‘Before we sacrifice one of our own, can you assure us that we will not suffer the same fate as Kiavahr?’

The discussion had reached an impasse, with both sides locked together by mutual need yet unable to prove the commitment required to further their plans. Corax did not like to use his Emperor-given gifts to cow others to his will – such measures were rarely lasting – but he pulled himself up to his full height, head nearly scraping the ceiling of the temple, and allowed the grandeur of his primarch essence to show. Pale flesh burned through blackened camouflage, revealing a ghost-white face, Corax’s eyes becoming orbs of utter darkness. He held up his claws: a mental command sent blue fronds of energy crackling along their length.

‘Should I wish it, I could kill you all now and depart. From here I would leave with my foes none the wiser, to return with my Legion to raze this planet and eradicate any threat it presents. No world is beyond the jurisdiction of the Emperor and his agents. Seven Legions were sent to destroy me at Isstvan, yet I survived. Do not think for a moment that this world possesses the power to destroy me. Any that move against the Nineteenth, as sure as iron rusts and flesh fails, I will see them slain by my own hand. Your need is greater than mine – do not scorn the opportunity of my presence.’

The effect on the tech-priests was immediate. Stunned by the magnificence and ferocity of the creature before them, they backed away, heads bowed to the authority of the primarch.

Corax allowed his presence to fade, reeling back the majesty of his nature behind walls of discipline and

humility. The facade he had built during those years hiding amongst the prisoners of Lycaeus felt like a return to normality rather than a caging of his might. It had always been his preference to inspire his followers with deeds and words rather than force subservience through coercion. His eyes dimmed as he looked at the cowering magi.

'Such is the threat,' he said quietly. He held out a hand, offering reassurance and friendship. 'The promise is to free Constanix from the coming tyranny of Delvere and the Word Bearers. Make no mistake, an alliance with their kind will doom your planet to slavery or destruction. Make your choice well.'

THREE

Three sleek Whispercutter landers skimmed across Atlas, the ten-man craft invisible in the last minutes of darkness. The Whispercutters were little more than winged anti-grav engines, the Raven Guard clinging to their sides exposed to the elements as they soared above the roofs of refineries and worker habitats. Dropped at high altitude from beneath the belly of a Stormbird, the landers were almost undetectable.

'Hard to port,' warned Stanz, shifting his weight.

Agapito clutched the grab rail tighter as the pilot, harnessed in the guidance cupola just in front of the commander, brought the lead Whispercutter into a tight turn, steering away from the centre of the city. The other two craft split towards their separate destinations, assigned during Agapito's briefing before they had left the *Kamiel*.

Below, Atlas was in turmoil. The headlights of a skitarii column moved along a main avenue towards the Third District, where three fires were burning: arson at empty ruins chosen by Corax to attract attention without putting the populace in needless danger. Here and there, not far from the blazes, the crack of gunfire echoed from the tenements and manufactoria. Las-fire sparkled from several rooftops, targeting one of the abandoned structures.

On the ground, squads of troopers moved from street to street, alley to alley, building to building. Most were normal men, raised under the aegis of the Mechanicum, dedicated to the cult of the Machine-God but otherwise unaugmented. Their squad leaders and officers were boosted, some through cybernetics and augmetics, some through gene-therapy and biological enhancement, depending upon the temple and magos to whom they were sworn.

At the forefront of the search for the city's elusive attackers was a small cadre of praetorians. These were the favoured warriors of the Mechanicum, some sporting near-completely artificial bodies. Each was unique, whether sleek and fast or bulky and beweaponed, possessing energy-crackling blades or multiple rocket launchers. Led by lesser tech-priests in the hierarchy of Atlas, the praetorians were as much dedications to the Machine-God as they were flesh-and-blood fighters.

Looking down, Agapito was glad that Atlas – indeed, Constanix II as a whole, as far as the intelligence went – had no herakli. The monstrous, heavily gunned brutes that had assisted in the fighting against the tech-guild rebels during the latest insurrection on Kiavahr would have been a tough proposition to face. Even so, the enemy had tanks, armoured walkers and transports in abundance, though several companies

of infantry were loyal to the magi allying themselves to Lord Corax. It was mainly these divided forces that were currently bearing the brunt of Magokritarch Vangellin's reprisal against the Third District.

Workers had been forced from their homes in the pre-shift hours, filling the streets with dazed, fatigued crowds that hindered both sides. To their credit, the skitarii of Vangellin were as unwilling as those of Loriark and his peers to endanger the non-combatants in the barge-city.

'What is the First Axiom of Victory?' Agapito asked Lieutenant Caderil, who was poised on the side of the Whispercutter behind the commander. A Terran veteran, Caderil would have made company command by now had the Legion not been devastated at the Dropsite Massacre. They exchanged over the vox-net – at this altitude the wind would have required them to shout over their external communicators.

'To be where the enemy desires one not to be,' replied Caderil.

Agapito turned his attention to another of the honour guard he had hand-picked for the mission. 'Harne, what is the First Axiom of Stealth?'

'To be other than where the enemy believes you to be,' came the legionary's sharp reply.

'So what do we do to gain victory by stealth?' the commander continued.

'Attack where the enemy does not want us to be, whilst feigning presence elsewhere,' said Caderil. He pointed towards the centre of the floating city. 'The main temple is our objective, but it is too well defended for direct assault. We have to draw out the enemy force, leaving the temple vulnerable to counter-attack.'

'Just like the Perfect Fortress,' said Harne.

'And Copatia, and Rigus Three, and lots of other places,' said Agapito. 'We don't have the numbers or firepower for a straight feint-and-attack here. Vangellin and his tech-priests won't deplete their defences unless they really need to, so our attack is a second diversionary assault. We have to make the enemy believe we're in much greater strength than we actually are.'

'The lord primarch gets the killing blow,' said Harne with a nod. 'I understand that.'

'It sounds like there's something you don't understand, Harne.'

'If the Word Bearers are on Iapetus, why are we fighting to take over Atlas?'

'Caderil, what is your explanation?' Agapito replied.

'A simple decapitation mission is unlikely to succeed without the element of surprise, and with the defences of the capital against us we lack the time needed to prepare a proper assault. Atlas is only achievable thanks to the presence of Loriark and his dissidents. There is no guarantee we would have any support on Iapetus. We simply don't have the numbers without the aid of the skitarii. Once we control Atlas, we have an established base of operations and also the firepower of a barge-city at our disposal.'

'And any skitarii that survive will likely side with the winners, regardless of who is commanding them at the moment,' added Shorin from the other side of the Whispercutter's narrow fuselage.

'A good assessment,' said Agapito.

'Four hundred metres from drop-point,' warned Stanz. The Whispercutter started dropping groundwards.

'Power up,' ordered Agapito. The whine of jump packs reverberated along the length of the lander as turbines spun into life.

The Whispercutter banked sharply between two smoke-belching chimneys, descending into the glare of an outdoor assembly line. The cabins of mechanical diggers were being attached to their chassis, line after line of servitor labourers with welding torches and grafted facemasks lighting the ground with white sparks and dribbling lines of red-hot metal. Ghosting above them, the Raven Guard passed unseen.

Lining up on the roadway beyond the factory, the Whispercutter glided down to fifty metres. In the lenses of Agapito's helm an objective reticule glowed into life, centred on a junction ahead. The metres counted down rapidly beside it.

‘Drop!’ he snapped the moment the countdown reached zero.

As one the Raven Guard released the grab rails and fell groundwards. Stanz had activated the machine-spirit guide in the moments before leaving; the Whispercutter ascended swiftly into the darkness, and would then head out to sea before ditching itself.

The ten Space Marines fell towards the road, activating their jump packs a few metres from impact to slow their descent. Even so, they hit the ground hard, ferrocrete cracking under their boots.

‘Caderil, up and left.’ Agapito was issuing orders without a moment’s pause, waving half their number with his second-in-command towards an elevated railroad station on the north-eastern corner of the junction. Heading directly to the right, the commander led the other four warriors into the shadow of a large silo. A momentary flick of his helm display to the local cartography confirmed that they were just over a kilometre from the main temple, outside its priority defence grid.

‘Follow me,’ he told the squad, igniting his jump pack as he headed towards his objective.

The Mechanicum strategy-net was a pleasingly efficient way of conducting war, Corax concluded. He issued another set of orders to the lexmechanics and logisticians gathered around him on the lower level of the temple. Without hesitation, the augmented machine-cultists translated and disseminated the information to their sub-commanders fighting across the city. Neurally connected to the command channels, the platoon leaders acted swiftly, breaking away from the fighting where they were likely to be overwhelmed, gathering again where the enemy were weakest.

Unlike the shrine at the top of the district temple, the command chamber was purely functional. Communications and monitoring servitors relayed information to the lexmechanics, who analysed the data-stream for pertinent information which they then passed to the logisticians updating the battle-space display. Systems that were more usually tasked with the marshalling of raw materials, fuel, manpower and production were equally suited to doing the same for soldiers and war engines.

‘Your strategy interface reminds me of one of the many battle simulations devised by my brother Guilliman,’ Corax remarked to Salva Kanar, who was overseeing the coterie of attendants. Just as then, the squads and men of the tech-guard acted by the will of Corax, effortlessly moved from one position to another as the primarch surveyed the scene depicted on a three-dimensional hololithic representation of Atlas, focused upon the Third District. Intelligence updates were fast and accurate, far more so than was possible with his Therion Cohort allies.

‘I have heard that the primarch of the Ultramarines constantly tested his war theories and stratagems during the Great Crusade in the artificial constructs of metriculator engines, as well as with real warriors,’ replied the magos.

‘Even the most sophisticated simulation is crude compared to real war,’ remarked the primarch. ‘Guilliman tried to learn everything he could from the experiences of his brothers when he first met them. I was constantly vexing him with complaints that he focused too much on distinct military units, not taking into account possible civilian participation. To him there was a line between combatants and non-combatants that I did not see. Before our first encounter Guilliman’s treatises had been swift to rule out casualty-depleted combat forces as incapable, since he was so used to wielding whole battalions and Chapters rather than handfuls of warriors. I demonstrated the error of these beliefs on several occasions, creating effective resistance out of meagre resources that Roboute had considered no longer viable.’

‘An occurrence to be proud of, I am sure,’ Kanar said evenly.

‘The cry of “no retreat” is meaningless to the Raven Guard,’ explained Corax, ‘a prideful boast rather than a sensible tactical doctrine. It was not until our third confrontation that Guilliman realised this for himself.’

‘To best one of the greatest strategos in the Imperium is no mean feat. We are blessed by your attendance.’

‘I make no such claim,’ Corax replied with a lopsided smile. ‘From the fourth simulation on, he had my mark and I could not beat him. He learns well, my brother, and he has far greater vision than me. While I was rescuing a single world from slavery, he was already building an empire of hundreds. I won battles against him, but never a war.’

Corax allowed himself a moment of reflection. He had received no word from Roboute Guilliman since before the treachery on Isstvan, though he had assumed that the Ultramarines were fighting against Horus given their primarch’s unquestioning adherence to the Emperor’s commands in the past. They had been operating far to the galactic east, around their burgeoning realm of Ultramar, far from the carnage that Horus’s forces had wrought over the following months. Isolated by the vicious warp tempests – the Ruinstorm, as Sagitha had called it – Ultramar might as well have been in another galaxy altogether.

However, the Navigator who had been imprisoned aboard the *Kamiel* had been able to provide more information regarding the XIII Legion. The Word Bearers had attempted to destroy Guilliman and his forces at the muster on Calth, and though their ambush had not quite succeeded in obliterating the Ultramarines as a threat, Guilliman’s warriors were sorely beset on the many worlds of their domain.

There was unlikely to be any swift victory in the galactic east, and Corax’s determination to slow and counter Horus’s advance was being vindicated with every world prised from his grip, every potential ally hardened against the wiles of the traitor primarchs.

It was this that lent such weight to the fight here on Constanix II. The resources of one world, even a forge world, were inconsequential in and of themselves in an Imperium of more than a million such planets, but every system that fell to Horus could tip the balance in the Warmaster’s favour.

Unfortunately, the forces loyal to Magokritarch Vangellin benefited from the same strategic facilities as Corax, though they lacked a primarch’s brilliance to orchestrate the entire affair. Less than two minutes had passed before Corax was needed to make adjustments to his battle plan once more.

‘Your adepts have arrived,’ announced the metallic voice of Loriark from the doorway behind Corax.

‘Adepts?’ said the primarch as he turned.

With the magos was Stradon Binalt, the chief Techmarine of Corax’s small force. His helmet was hanging on his belt and his expression was one of frustration.

‘Your pardon, Lord Corax, but you told me that the magi had given their permission for our work,’ said the Techmarine.

‘I was assured full cooperation,’ replied Corax, turning his gaze to Loriark. ‘Is there some problem, magos?’

‘Adept Binalt’s working methods are highly unorthodox, primarch,’ said the tech-priest with a shake of his head. ‘He tampers with complex mechanisms without the proper rites. Though there is much merit to your plan, it risks disabling one of our greatest combat assets if the correct procedures are ignored.’

‘We don’t have time for mumblings and censer-swinging, lord primarch,’ protested Stradon. ‘We’ve done it a dozen times before on ships. We know what we are doing.’

‘I concur,’ said Corax. ‘Magos Loriark, please ensure that my Techmarines can continue their modifications without interruption.’

Loriark bowed his head in acquiescence but the hunch of his shoulders communicated his displeasure without words.

Corax turned to Stradon. ‘All is well. Return to the arming bay and ensure the work is completed on schedule. By my reckoning, Commander Agapito will be making his move in a little under four minutes. You have twenty to be in position.’

‘We’ll be ready,’ said the Techmarine, leaving with swift steps.

There was grave misgiving in Loriark’s posture and although Corax had no time for the superstitions of the Mechanicum, it was important that he did nothing to unnecessarily alienate his allies.

‘When the battle at hand is won, you may perform whatever rites and checks you deem necessary,’ he told the magos.

Mollified by this concession, Loriark bowed and left. Corax returned his attention to the hololith. Vangellin’s forces were pushing into Third District from the east and north, just as Corax had planned. He snapped off a couple of commands to draw them further from the main temple complex, widening the gap for Agapito to exploit. Beside the primarch, Kanar was looking pensively at the display as the red runes of their foes approached within two kilometres of the temple.

‘Relax,’ Corax told him, soothing the tech-priest’s worries with a calm tone. ‘We’ll know if the plan has worked in mere minutes.’

‘And if it has failed?’ asked Kanar.

‘Plenty of time to come up with another.’ Corax gently laid a reassuring hand on the magos’s shoulder. ‘Do you trust me?’

Kanar looked up at the primarch’s face and saw only his honest intent, despite Corax’s concerns.

‘Yes, lord primarch, yes I do.’

‘Then send the signal,’ Corax said quietly, fastening his armour seals ready to leave. ‘Open a path to the temple. An invitation Vangellin cannot ignore.’

He was passing command to Kanar and his fellow tech-priests. If they planned to betray him, then that would be the prime opportunity. But with such a small force at his disposal, the primarch had no other option.

An explosion several kilometres away lit up the skyline of the First District at Atlas’s heart. Agapito knew it was the charges set by Sergeant Chamell’s team, destroying a refinery feedline on the far side of the main temple complex. He watched the fireball ascending into the heavens without magnification, his armoured suit running on minimal power as he and the two squads with him crouched atop the roof of an empty transit terminal half a kilometre from the main gates.

Powered down, the Raven Guard were giant statues of black in the darkness, their armour running only essential support systems. With no display chronometer to keep track of time, Agapito mentally counted down from the blast, allowing Vangellin time to react and send out forces to counter-attack. Forty-three seconds passed before a flurry of anti-grav skimmers ascended through the lights of the temple and headed south towards the fresh blaze. Warning sirens echoed along the deserted streets as a column of russet-painted armoured quadrupeds emerged from the widening gate – ‘Syrbotus-class’, Corax had called them – followed by dozens of infantry heading out at a run.

The Raven Guard commander waited patiently as the ten vehicles turned along a sidestreet, lumbering in the direction of Chamell’s attack. The red-armoured infantry followed close behind, lasguns glinting in the light of the refinery fire. The last of the column was almost through the gate when Agapito ordered the squads to move. At the edge of his vision, he saw Sergeant Korell’s squad moving in on a convergent course from the left while Caderil’s combat squad approached from the right.

Their timing was perfect.

Energy flooded through his armour’s systems and Agapito’s jump pack flared as he leapt across the road to the next rooftop, his warriors bounding along behind him. His tactical display glimmered into life, targeting reticules springing up everywhere he looked. Landing, he took three swift strides and jumped again, aiming for a crane gantry that straddled the next road.

They covered the first three hundred metres in fifteen seconds, coming together again atop the corner towers of a keep-like outpost overlooked by the gate guns. To their right, out of sight, more detonations shook the buildings as Chamell's concealed plasma mines took out the lead walkers. Agapito's enhanced hearing and all-frequency scanner picked up the panicked shouts and garbled comm-chatter of the shocked skitarii.

He led the Raven Guard on without any need for an order to be given – they all knew what to do.

The twenty legionaries fell upon the rear squads of the column, frag grenades announcing their arrival as they plunged towards the road with jump packs and bolters blazing.

Agapito landed squarely upon a soldier with a bionic arm, crushing him with his armoured weight. He lashed out with his sword, chopping through the midsection of another. The tower guns on the temple perimeter stayed silent, prevented from firing by their automated friend-or-foe protocols as the Raven Guard shredded the rear echelon without effort. Agapito could easily imagine the desperate tech-adepts inside the defence towers frantically trying to override those protocols.

With more than fifty foes slain in a few seconds, Agapito ordered his squads to relocate, leaping back up to the rampart of the outer tower seconds before the cannons of the temple wall opened fire, obliterating a score more of their own fighters. Someone evidently *had* disarmed the protocols.

Several heavily armoured walkers had turned back towards the attack on their column and were raising their turret guns towards Agapito's position.

'Split by fives, quadrants three and four,' he ordered, activating his jump pack to launch himself towards the incoming walking tanks.

The Raven Guard broke apart into their combat squads, fanning out to either side of the column, using the cover of the rooftops to close the distance as the walkers opened fire. Incendiary shells and plasma missiles slammed into the buildings, smashing ferrocrete and turning plasteel to molten splashes of red. The legionaries were too fast to track, sprinting and leaping towards the Syrbotae.

Each squad fell upon a different target, melta bombs in hand as they plunged down onto the slab-roofed war engines. Stubby point-defence guns spat hails of bullets as the crews of the walkers tried to bring fire against their attackers, but the response was too slow; the legionaries were atop the armoured Mechanicum creations in moments.

Agapito landed heavily as one of the machines reared up to meet him, amber warning signals flaring across his vision while impact compensators strained in the legs of his armour. Grunting through the dull ache in his knees he slammed a discus-shaped melta bomb onto a hatchway and stepped back. A second later the charge detonated, punching through the cupola to leave a ragged, white-edged hole. The charred corpse of a crewman who had been preparing to open the hatch fell to one side as Agapito pushed his plasma pistol through the breach and fired towards the driver's compartment. The Syrbotus shuddered as though injured, and came to a stop.

Two frag grenades went down into the hole to ensure that nobody survived to take the dead driver's place.

Around the commander the rest of the Raven Guard were blasting and tearing their way into the other Syrbotae. Las-fire from the accompanying infantry sliced from their power armour and pattered against the armoured hulls of their targets. Several of the legionaries turned their attention to the escorts, firing back with hails of bolts that tore through the armoured breastplates and padded suits of the unaugmented infantry.

One by one the remaining Syrbotae were felled by detonations from within, crew slain and vital mechanics destroyed. From further down the road came a fresh storm of fire, aimed not at the Raven Guard but at their enemies. Laying down a barrage with plasma fire and rockets, Chamell's warriors

covered Agapito and his squads as they broke free, withdrawing once more to the rooftops.

As expected, more forces poured from the temple gates over the following minutes. Open-topped transports carrying squads of heavily armed praetorian infantry, accompanied by multi-turreted crawlers, ploughed onto the streets, unleashing a storm of shells and lascannon fire as Agapito's and Chamell's warriors fell back from the attack, fading into the night.

Gun towers further up the huge temple pyramid rained down balls of plasma and incendiary charges onto the city below, shattering buildings as the tech-priests spewed forth their spite, inconsiderate of the damage they were wreaking upon their own city. A few legionaries were caught in the open, armour broken by shell detonations, bodies seared by white-hot promethium explosions, but the commander led most of them to safety.

Using rooftops and alleys to shield themselves from the vengeful machine-cultists, the Space Marines withdrew from their objective. To the Mechanicum defenders, it looked as though the Raven Guard assault on the gate towers had been foiled.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Above Atlas, Corax circled, his flight pack aided by the thermals rising from a score of burning buildings. He watched the scene unfolding below with a calculating gaze: Raven Guard squads collapsing back towards Third District as skitarii regiments loyal to Loriark and his companions moved eastwards, holding the brunt of the counter-assault from Second District.

There appeared to be a fatal error in the retreat, an opening that Vangellin evidently saw: a column of tanks and warriors advanced down a wide boulevard like a red spear aimed away from the rebel temple. A handful of Raven Guard lobbed plasma charges and fired missiles from the shelter of broken doorways and shattered windows, forcing the part-machine praetorians to bail out of their transports and giving the illusion that the attack had not been abandoned altogether. The legionaries retreated into the shadows before the return fire of blast-carbines and crackling lightning guns, drawing the magokritarch's forces onwards for another few hundred metres.

At the far end of the boulevard the ruddy sky shimmered, the night clouds lit by the flames of the burning city. There was a deeper haze between the advancing column and the Third District temple, almost undetectable even though Corax knew it was there.

As though coalescing from the shroud of smoke that lay upon Atlas, the Warlord Titan *Castor Terminus* disengaged its newly adapted reflex shields, powering up its weapons.

The immense walker straddled the boulevard like a colossus of legend, its white and pale blue livery stark against the night sky as search lamps blazed into life and cockpit canopies in its head lit up like gleaming azure eyes. Constanix did not have a Titan Legio of its own, but several war machines from the Legio Nivalis, the Ice Giants, were stationed amongst the planet's cities. Modifying the war engine's void shields with Kiavahran reflex technology had allowed the Titan to move unseen by the sensors of Vangellin's forces, traversing four kilometres from its arming bay in the south of Third District.

Castor Terminus opened fire with all four of its main weapon systems. A multi-barrelled las-blaster hanging from the right shoulder mount chewed through half a dozen tanks, lighting up engines and ammunition stores with a flurry of white beams. The macro-cannon of the left arm pounded out immense shells, obliterating dozens more of the onrushing vehicles. From the Titan's crenellated carapace, micro-munitions dischargers launched hundreds of guided explosive darts into the air, the detonations of which rolled along the street like a hurricane of fire, engulfing everything in their path.

The tanks and praetorians were taken completely by surprise and barely a shot was loosed in return during thirty seconds of fire and fury. Wrecks and corpses littered the wide street, secondary detonations

and burning fuel lighting up the boulevard, the cracks of popping metal and burning rounds ringing from the buildings.

As quickly as it appeared the *Castor Terminus* disappeared again as the reflex shields engaged once more. Corax caught a last glimpse of the immense war engine turning away towards the east as the great guns of the temple started to rain shells down onto its position. Without void shields, surprise had been the Titan's greatest defence and now the princeps would retreat, his mission completed.

'Dive!' the primarch commanded, arrowing groundwards. There was no time to lose; Vangellin had realised that his counter-attack was failing and was drawing back forces to protect the temple.

Behind the primarch, a Shadowhawk gunship plunged from the fume clouds contained within Atlas's weather-shield, a blur of black against the dark sky. Four sets of triple-mounted heavy bolters opened fire, impacts rippling along the street as they scythed through a flood of infantry surging back towards the gatehouses.

The Shadowhawk's strafing run was just the last in the long series of feints, drawing streams of tracer fire from the temple's anti-air turrets as it swept past, bright flashes tearing through the drop-ship's wake but missing their mark.

Unnoticed, Corax dropped down towards the upper storeys of the temple.

He aimed for a balcony on the highest tier of the ziggurat, in front of a tall arched window. The primarch allowed himself a grim smile; he often mused that if he had possessed such a flight pack during the uprising on Deliverance, then he could have taken the Ravenspire himself and saved weeks of bitter fighting.

Barely slowing, Corax crashed into the temple feet first, shattering the inches-thick crystalflex with clawed boots. Luxurious carpet and the stone beneath were torn to shreds as he dragged himself to a halt on the floor within.

Standing in front of a massive display screen was Vangellin, the magokritarch obvious by his long red robes stitched with golden Mechanicum runes. He held a cog-topped staff of office in one hand; the other was a hooked claw that twitched spasmodically as the ruler of Atlas turned towards the intruder.

Three hulking combat servitors lumbered towards Corax, weapon barrels spinning up, chainblades screeching. Overpowering his talons, the primarch sent sparking arcs of energy into two of the half-machine brutes. He leapt to the right as the third opened fire, diving over the stream of las-bolts that erupted from its twin cannons. A step and a jump sent Corax past his mechanical foe, lightning claw carving through its midriff from gut to spine, cutting the servitor in half.

As blood and fuel spewed across the room, Corax turned his attention to three tech-priests at the bank of consoles to his right, only now reacting to the intruder in their midst. There was no time for subtlety, to gauge their individual tolerances to injury; killing blows were unfortunate but necessary.

His next strike took the head off the closest – a female adept reaching for a pistol at her belt. Behind her the next tech-priest clenched an articulated metal fist. The bionic appendage was sent flying across the chamber as Corax's following sweep took the Mechanicum cultist through the shoulder and sank deep into his tube-pierced chest. The third, eyes replaced with goggle-like ruby lenses, opened his mouth to shout a warning moments before Corax's claw jabbed up through the bottom of his jaw, erupting from the top of his scalp with a spray of bluish fluid.

Corax pulled his weapon free and turned to the magokritarch. The primarch wanted him alive.

Vangellin thrust his staff towards Corax, a spew of energy bolts erupting from its tip. Corax had been warned of the weapon by his allies and was ready, dodging a fusillade that shattered dials and gauges behind him. A leap and a kick sent the magokritarch flying across the chamber to crash into a panel of screens with an eruption of cobalt sparks.

Looming over Vangellin, reflected in the polished ebon plate that made up almost half of the Mechanicum magos's face, Corax raised his claw in readiness for another blow.

'Stand your warriors down, and yield,' he snarled.

Vangellin's remaining eye regarded the towering primarch with all-too-human fear. Oily blood trickled from a gash across the tech-priest's forehead, pooling around the rivets that ran in a line down the centre of his face.

'Enough,' wheezed the lord of Atlas. 'You have my surrender.'

FOUR

Atlas's main temple chamber was filled with tech-adepts, attending to the damage-control circuits and mechanisms that commanded and monitored the barge-city's defences, energy grid and a dozen other vital systems. Agapito had escorted Loriark and the other magi of Third District to Corax a few minutes earlier, along with an entourage from other precincts. These were swiftly led back out again as they bombarded the primarch with questions and demands. Now only Loriark, Firax and Agapito remained, and between them sat the former Magokritarch Vangellin, hunched in a chair with his natural hand held across a dented metal chestplate. He glowered at Corax.

'Your victory will be short-lived.' Exposed by his ripped robe, his sallow skin was covered with spots of thick, drying blood. 'Do you think I freely gave in to Delvere's demands? He wields a power greater than even a primarch.'

'The power of the Omnissiah?' said Agapito, standing beside his lord. 'Your Machine-God will save him from vengeance?'

'The power of the warp.' What little could be seen of Vangellin's cracked lips twisted in a sneer. 'The warp unchained.'

'You have seen this for yourself?' grated Loriark. 'What manner of creations is the archmagos forging on Iapetus?'

'What did you learn from the memory stores of your companion?' Corax asked, ignoring the magokritarch's posturing. 'Did he know what Delvere is planning?'

'Nothing more than we could have guessed,' replied Loriark with a shake of the head. 'Delvere is long studied in the mechanics and arts of the warp and with the aid of the Word Bearer, Nathrakin, is creating new engines to harness its power.'

'Not only to harness it, but bring it to life, to give it divine mechanical form!' snapped Vangellin. 'The warp sustained – yes, that is what he has achieved. The synthesis of material and immaterial. The symbiosis of the physical and the incorporeal. Even as he threatened me with its power, he showed me the heights of greatness to which Constanix can now aspire. We will rival Anvillus, Gryphonne, perhaps even Mars itself when our power is revealed.'

'More powerful… than the sacred… Red Planet?' Even with his laboured words, Firax's incredulity was plain to hear. 'If you believe… such lies then you… are a fool. It is right… that we resisted your…

delusions.'

Corax turned away from the others and stared out of the shattered remains of the window. Dawn was spreading across Atlas, now strangely peaceful in the pinkish light. Vangellin had been true to his word of surrender, formally handing power to Loriark in exchange for his life. The fighting had lasted only a few minutes more as word had spread that order had been restored, the speed of the command network as swift to restore peace as it had been to break it. Loriark had sent a brief statement to the outer districts explaining that Vangellin had been accused of techno-heresies and would face judgement by his fellow magi in due course. Freed from the threats of Vangellin, the other district temples had been swift to acknowledge Loriark's claim, backed as it was by more Raven Guard arriving from orbit in the dawn hours.

Squads of soldiers and battle engines had been withdrawn, to be replaced by teams of labourers and repair equipment. Cranes and grav-lifters, cyber-reticulated work crews and myriad other men and machines were clearing the rubble, shoring up damaged buildings and dousing the flames left by just three hours of close fighting.

'If Delvere's studies into the warp are so advanced, how can a legionary of the Word Bearers help him?' Agapito asked. Corax glanced over his shoulder to see the commander standing over Vangellin, arms folded across his chest. 'What could this Nathrakin know of the warp that the archmagos doesn't?'

'The wrong sort of knowledge,' said Corax before Vangellin could answer. 'You remember the Word Bearers at Cruciax? Or those poor creatures on the *Kamiel*? The hideous beasts that came at us on Isstvan Five?'

Agapito's grimace showed clearly that he remembered the mutated warriors who had followed Lorgar during the Dropsite Massacre. Corax knew that there had been whispers and rumours ever since of mysterious powers at play.

He had been too focused on rebuilding the Legion and then striking back at Horus to quell the chattering, but now it was time to make certain truths known. Truths that had been revealed to him directly by the Emperor; truths that even now were hinted at in the recesses of his mind where the last memories the Emperor had passed to Corax still dwelt, like shadows at the bottom of a gorge.

He trusted Agapito, and had done so since they had first stood together so many decades ago. Though hot-headed of late, he needed to know the nature of the foes they were now facing; all of the Raven Guard deserved that after suffering so much at their hands.

'There are creatures that live within the warp,' said Corax. Agapito nodded in understanding and was about to reply but the primarch cut him off. 'Things not just in the warp but *of* the warp. The creatures that can consume a ship if its Geller fields fail. The creatures that the Navigators call the empyrean predators, and the Emperor calls daemons.'

Agapito muttered with distaste while a cruel laugh erupted from Vangellin. The other tech-priests listened with interest, seemingly detached from concern.

'Yes, daemons,' said Corax. 'Beings not of flesh but of the stuff of the warp itself.'

'But what has that got to do with the Word Bearers?' asked Agapito.

'I saw the power in them, and I saw it written in the eyes of Lorgar as I confronted him. There is another name for the warp, which the Emperor knew and I now remember. *Chaos*.'

There was a flicker of recognition in the eyes of Agapito as he heard the word that had been whispered amongst the ranks, but never spoken outright. Corax continued.

'The daemons of Chaos cannot exist in our world without a conduit. They are made up of the warp and so reality leeches their power. The Word Bearers we have fought, the twisted warriors that we faced, made themselves such conduits. They gave up a portion of their flesh, parts of their minds, so that these

creatures could reside within them.'

Agapito turned on Vangellin and seized him by the throat, dragging him from the chair.

'Delvere and Nathrakin are infecting the people of Iapetus with this daemon-curse?' he growled. 'You knew of this and allied with them?'

'Nothing so crude,' whispered Vangellin. 'Flesh is temporal, impermanent. Machine… Machine is immortal, fitting for the hosts of the Great Ones.'

'Let him go,' Corax said quietly. Agapito obeyed without comment, dropping the deposed magokritarch back into his seat. The primarch looked at Loriark and Firax. 'Is it possible? Could Chaos become manifest in a creation of wire and circuit, adamantium and plasteel?'

'If it is possible, Delvere will find a way,' said Loriark. 'At the smallest level, flesh is nothing more than a mechanism too, composed of electrical impulses and exchanges of information. Life is simply a biological machine.'

Corax took a deep breath and pursed his lips. He had thought that perhaps the Word Bearers had been coming in desperation to Constanix II, seeking repairs or fresh arms and armour. The reality was far more grave, and made the primarch all the more glad that he had followed his instinct to come to the forge world. Constanix II had not been chosen by Nathrakin because it was rich in resources, but for the opposite reason. It was inconsequential – out of sight and out of mind. What better place to conduct experiments of the nature being discussed?

'Whatever advancements our enemies have made, they must be stopped,' he told the others. 'Not only must we destroy any machines they have created, the knowledge of their creation cannot leave this world.'

'And the Word Bearers?' Agapito asked the question casually, but Corax could feel the anger concealed beneath the commander's calm.

'They will be dealt with in due course,' the primarch replied carefully. 'The mission is to rid Constanix of their corrupting influence. To thwart their plans will be punishment enough. This is no time for vendetta. Victory is vengeance.'

Agapito did not reply, and it was plain that the primarch's words were not to his liking.

'There is far more at stake than simply revenge against the traitors that tried to exterminate us,' Corax said solemnly, trying to make Agapito understand. 'It was such errors of judgement, the desire to put personal need and gain above duty and service, which has led to so many following the Warmaster into treachery. It is the ambitions of the weak that the daemons of Chaos seek to exploit. Even here, their temptations have lured the archmagos down a corrupt path, twisting his pursuit of knowledge into something far darker.'

It was not clear whether the commander understood fully the threat that Horus's alliance had unleashed, but he nodded in compliance and stepped towards the door.

'I have to see to the marshalling of the Talons arriving from the *Kamiel*,' Agapito said. 'If you will excuse me, lord primarch?'

'One moment more, commander. Loriark, how soon do you think Delvere will learn of what has happened here?'

'A brief examination of the transmission logs shows that communication with the capital was sparse during the battle,' the magos replied. 'Delvere knows that there has been an uprising and will deduce from the lack of contact that it was successful. There is nothing to indicate that your presence is known.'

'Good,' said Corax, looking back to Agapito. 'Ensure that every weapon system on Atlas is operational. Coordinate with the magi and skitarii force commanders to create assault companies. I will review the preparations in two hours.'

‘Assault companies?’ wheezed Firax. ‘Surely we must… see to the defence of… Atlas first. The highest probability… is that Delvere’s response… will be a counter-attack.’

‘We will not be giving him the opportunity. We have the initiative and we will keep it. Magokritarch Loriark, set Atlas on a course for the capital. We will attack Iapetus at the earliest opportunity.’

Almost lost in the ever-present low cloud of Constanix II, vapour contrails cut across the midday sky. Corax watched them coming closer from the observatorium atop the main temple of Atlas, gazing skywards with Loriark beside him. Glimmers of engines rose up from the barge-city to meet the approaching craft from Iapetus. From this vantage point he could also see the grey-foamed seas stretching unbroken to the horizon, a low haze rising from the acidic waters.

Massive anti-grav repellers and plasma drives kept the city aloft, and though the shields kept Atlas protected from the acid storms that occasionally surged across its path they did nothing to ward away the chill of the air five hundred metres above sea level. To Corax the cold was of no consequence, but he was keenly aware of the discomfort it would be causing the unaugmented populace of the city. They were for the most part hard at work in munitions factories, manufacturing shells and energy packs for the skitarii and their war engines. Corax had gone to some lengths to make the people of Atlas feel as much a part of this endeavour as his warriors and the soldiers of the Mechanicum; the factory shift labourers had just as much to lose in the coming battle and had already suffered casualties in the struggle for possession of Atlas.

‘Are you sure it is wise to allow them to approach so closely?’ asked the tech-priest.

‘It is essential,’ replied Corax. He watched as the two squadrons converged on each other, the reconnaissance craft from the capital splitting apart as the six Primaris Lightning interceptors broke into pairs to rise above them. ‘I want Delvere to see Atlas and think that he faces only Mechanicum forces. The presence of my Raven Guard is best hidden behind false intelligence. Your pilots have been correctly briefed?’

‘They will allow one of the enemy spycraft to evade destruction and return to Iapetus, as we discussed.’

‘Then I must do as the rest of my troops and make myself unseen.’

Corax headed down the broad stairwell into the upper level of the temple, Loriark at his heel. In the barge-city’s control centre adepts manned the scanner arrays, seeking to pinpoint the capital’s current location. It had taken nearly three days to cover more than twelve hundred kilometres, but now the primarch felt that his target was, relatively speaking, close at hand. The recon craft overhead had a range in hundreds of kilometres but it seemed unlikely that Delvere would have retreated in the face of the approaching barge-city. If anything, the tech-priests predicted Iapetus was most likely on a closing course to bring retribution to Atlas. Moving at full speed, the two cities were likely to come within sight of each other some time in the next ten hours.

It was unfortunate that the *Kamiel* had to remain hidden from Iapetus’s considerable sensors and defence cannons; an orbital scan would have located Iapetus with ease. As things stood, the captured strike cruiser had been forced to disengage into deeper space after despatching its cargo of legionaries and strike craft, to avoid detection by the Mechanicum’s orbital stations and patrolling monitor craft. Those same orbital assets were no doubt fixed upon Atlas’s current path and Delvere would know exactly where his enemies were. It was for this reason that Corax had permitted the recon overflight; the enemy could learn little more than they already knew, and the opportunity to mislead the foe was to be seized, turning the disadvantage around.

If Corax could not be somewhere other than where his enemy believed him to be, a good compromise was to feign lesser strength until the final moment. As he had laid down in the combat doctrine of his

Legion, if utter concealment was impossible, partial concealment was still preferable to none.

The hunched Salva Kanar approached Corax and the magokritarch with a deferential nod of the head.

'Radio-stream analysis has detected a confluence of signals approximately three hundred kilometres distant on bearing zero-eighty. The spycraft above are drone operated and we are attempting to reveal-trace the source of their control signals. This should allow us to triangulate with our other readings.'

'Prepare anti-air batteries to fire,' Corax said, motioning Loriark to the servitors and adepts manning the weapons metriculators. 'Our drop-craft are concealed as best we could manage but let us not give the enemy the opportunity of too much time.'

Loriark obeyed without comment; he seemed to have acquiesced to Corax's authority easily enough, but the primarch knew it was out of necessity rather than any deeper loyalty. Corax unconsciously checked that the five Raven Guard legionaries stationed in the command chamber were alert and was pleased to see the black-armoured warriors paying close attention to everything that passed. If given the chance, Loriark might well decide to sacrifice the Raven Guard in an attempt to bargain for peace with Delvere. The primarch was not willing to afford the magokritarch that chance.

A distinct hum set the temple vibrating slightly as power channels were opened and Atlas's weapons systems came online. It was likely that only Corax noticed the change, registering not only the miniscule trembling but also the subtle alteration in the electromagnetic field that sheathed the barge-city. Any target more than a kilometre distant was beyond the energy shield, so targeting the recon jets required very careful calibration between the gun batteries and the field's internal frequency.

'Ready to fire, lord primarch,' Loriark informed him.

'Open fire,' Corax replied with a nod.

The energy field stuttered for a few microseconds; enough time for the lasers of the anti-aircraft turrets to loose a salvo of shots towards the enemy craft circling overhead.

'No hits,' reported one of the adepts.

'Enemy craft withdrawing from immediate airspace,' another confirmed from the sensor banks.

'Lightning flight leaders requesting authorisation for pursuit,' a third adept announced.

'Twenty kilometres, no more,' Corax ordered. 'Clear Atlas's airspace and then they are to return to maintain air patrol cover.'

'Yes, lord primarch.'

Corax watched patiently as glowing runes slid across the strategic displays while the interceptors hounded the enemy recon craft away to the south-east. He noted that the direction the fleeing spycraft took was towards the radio anomaly detected earlier; Iapetus was almost directly in Atlas's path.

'Magokritarch, we convene pre-battle council in one hour. All forces are to be on utmost readiness. Our enemy is close. Send word to all stations, squadrons and company leaders – make battle preparations.'

Receiving an affirmative from Loriark, Corax quit the command level and made his way down the central stairwells of the temple; it was too undignified for him to crouch inside the conveyor cages that transported the smaller tech-priests from storey to storey.

'Agapito,' he called over the vox-net. 'Meet me at the main temple gatehouse. I have plans we need to discuss.'

'*Yes, Lord Corax*,' came the commander's reply. '*I am overseeing the assembly of the first assault column. I will be at the temple in seven minutes, with your leave*.'

'Very well. Attend to immediate concerns first, commander. I will come to you.'

Corax ignored the stares from the multitude of tech-priests as he made his way down to ground level. The primarch was alert at every moment, conscious that any one of the Mechanicum cultists might have been swayed to the cause of Delvere. He did not fear attack – not even together would the gathered

machine-men be a match for him – but he watched for any sign of treachery. If Delvere and his allies were to receive warning that they faced a primarch, Corax's entire strategy would be put in jeopardy.

Gauging the emotions of the tech-priests was not as easy as with normal men. Many had their faces concealed behind masks, or their features were heavily modified with bionics and augmetics. Some were incapable of emotion at all, their consciousness transferred to inorganic cogitators that made them creatures of pure logic. It was these metriculatii that worried Corax the most. Fear of reprisal would keep most of the tech-priests in check, but if circumstances changed enough that the logical course of action would be to turn on the Raven Guard there were those amongst the cult of Atlas who would do so in a nanosecond. It was the primarch's intention to ensure that his course of action would prove superior, eliminating the possibility of betrayal.

It was with such thoughts, his expression guarded, that Corax exited the main temple building into the compound. Glancing up, he saw the vapour trails of the dogfight were quickly dissipating in the high winds.

'I've shown you what you wanted to see,' he whispered to himself. 'Now come and get us.'

The clatter of rivet drivers, the whine of ceramite bonders and the hiss of spark-welders rang loudly throughout the hangar-like arming house of the Fourth District. Overseen by red-robed tech-adepts, gangs of workers swarmed across three lines of tracked tanks, assault guns and personnel carriers, affixing additional armour plating to the fronts of the vehicles. Agapito walked between the lines of armoured carriers and turreted behemoths, casting his eye over the work being done.

Everything was proceeding in a timely and orderly fashion. The work teams laboured with quiet determination while crew captains and squad leaders inspected the modifications being made to their vehicles with keen interest; they would be the men and women pushing head-on into the enemy defence, and their lives were being staked upon the improvised upgrades.

Behind the columns of armoured vehicles were lined batteries of field guns and self-propelled artillery pieces. Laser-based cannons, rotary guns and shell-firers sat alongside more esoteric lightning throwers and fusion beams, sonic destructors and conversion beamers. Many of the designs were familiar to the Raven Guard commander, but in all the years he had fought for the Legion he had never trusted the more outlandish Mechanicum weapons. They could be devastating when functioning, but the required maintenance and constant tech-priest attention made them impractical within the primarch's code of self-sufficiency and flexibility. He much preferred a trained legionary with a missile launcher to any of the bizarre war engines on display.

Sergeant Caldour announced that Corax had arrived at the armoury complex, and Agapito left the main workshop to meet his primarch in one of the overseer galleries above the manufactory floor. He met Corax at the foot of the stairwell and was waved to precede the primarch to the upper level.

'Everything is progressing?' asked the primarch, speaking over the comm-net. Corax had emphasised the need to maintain strict communications security on Atlas and the command channel was the most secure vox-transmission available. The ciphers were changed every hour and keyed to the individual transponders located in every Raven Guard's armour. It would be all but impossible for any of the Mechanicum to listen in.

'Two more hours and everything will be in accordance with your orders, Lord Corax.' Agapito kept his reply formal, uncertain why the primarch had chosen to visit him. The commander wondered if he was under scrutiny for his recent actions and wanted to show a disciplined, trustworthy appearance.

'What do you make of our allies' resources?' The two of them reached the upper landing and Agapito led Corax out onto a meshwork balcony overlooking the arming bay. 'Do you think they will serve our

purposes?'

'Well armed, and with the upgrades to the frontal armour they'll be able to take a lot of damage going into the enemy, lord,' Agapito replied. 'Slow, though. Even slower than normal, with the extra weight. This won't be any lightning assault.'

'No,' Corax said quietly. The primarch paused for a moment, obviously in thought. 'Too slow perhaps. I have re-evaluated the battle plan and made some adjustments. I wanted to brief you first. I will inform the magokritarch and the others when the time is appropriate.'

'What changes, Lord Corax? I have mustered four attack columns across the prow districts of Atlas in preparation for a three-pronged assault and a moving reserve as you requested. It will take some time to relocate them.'

'The Mechanicum forces will deploy as planned – there is no need for a reorganisation at this stage. It is our warriors whose role I have changed.'

'You do not wish for us to act as mobile support for the assault columns? Atlas cannot match Iapetus's defenders on a one-for-one basis. We need to maintain the Raven Guard as a mobile element to create breakthrough points.'

'We do, which is why I have a new role for you and the legionaries, Agapito.' Corax laid a reassuring hand on the commander's shoulder and looked down at the assembled war engines. 'I plan to take Iapetus the same way we took Atlas. We'll draw out Delvere's forces and then make a decapitation strike on the main temple.'

'You are going after Delvere and Nathrakin alone?' Agapito would never second-guess his primarch's decisions, nor underestimate his prowess in battle, but a single-handed attack seemed suicidal.

'I'll take two squads with me, in Shadowhawks. Atlas's army is simply too slow to achieve the victory we need.' The primarch folded his arms and stared out across the arming area, though his gaze seemed far more distant, as though he was looking away to his target. 'If Delvere senses he is losing there is every chance he will attempt to escape. If he does so, he will relocate to another barge-city or perhaps even leave Constanix altogether. The knowledge he has gained from the Word Bearers cannot be allowed to leave this planet. We need to seize control of the temple complex and contain the traitors as quickly as possible, preferably before Delvere realises he is in danger of losing the war.'

'So how will the Talons fight, Lord Corax?' Agapito had recovered some of his composure, acknowledging the reasoning of his primarch. 'There are likely to be Word Bearers protecting the capital alongside the Mechanicum soldiers, and we have no idea how many of Lorgar's scum have come here.'

'There cannot be many Word Bearers,' said Corax. 'It would appear the *Kamiel* is the only contact they have made with Constanix, and even at full complement she would carry no more than five hundred legionaries. From the account of the Navigator, the Word Bearers were pulled together from several formations on Calth, survivors banding together under Nathrakin. Also, if Nathrakin had a more numerous contingent then it would be in his interests to spread them throughout all of the barge-cities to establish wider control, rather than concentrate his force in one place. A follower of Lorgar would not hesitate to spread influence and proselytise their creed if given the opportunity. No, I must conclude that the Word Bearers do not outnumber us here. Quite the opposite, in fact.'

'But we cannot ignore them as a military threat, lord,' said Agapito. 'With those same numbers we were able to take control of Atlas. If we fight them head-on we simply negate the advantage of our presence.'

'That is exactly why we will not engage the Word Bearers directly, but leave them to the greater numbers of the skitarii. We must concentrate our effort and strength on achieving the central objective – the temple and Delvere.'

'I cannot order the Talons to ignore the Word Bearers, lord,' protested Agapito, though the argument was

more from his own feeling than for his legionaries. ‘Our warriors have scores to settle.’

‘The legionaries will do as they are ordered,’ growled the primarch, turning his black stare on Agapito, making it clear that he included Agapito in that remark. The commander flinched as if he had been struck. ‘We have spent many years fighting alongside each other, Agapito, but do not test our friendship any further. I am your primarch and Legion commander and you will not disobey me. The Talons take their lead from you. You will set the right example.’

‘Yes, Lord Corax.’ Agapito cast his gaze downwards, shamed by Corax’s words. ‘It will be as you say.’

‘Good.’ The primarch’s anger vanished as swiftly as it had appeared. ‘Delvere and Nathrakin will be expecting an attack from the tech-guard. In fact, I believe they will seek to attack first, forcing Atlas onto the defensive. We cannot allow that to happen. To ensure that surprise is maximised, the Raven Guard will form the first attack wave. Every Shadowhawk, Whispercutter and other craft you can muster will carry a single assault force into the heart of the enemy city. Your Talons must be like a lodestone, dragging the enemy into battle, forcing them to abandon their perimeter to contest against an attack from inside their lines.’

‘Hard fighting,’ said Agapito. ‘The best place for us. I take it that there can be no possibility of extraction?’

‘Only if annihilation is the alternative. This is not a terminus mission. Commander, I expect you to win through with as few casualties as possible. Manoeuvre, attack and speed.’

‘Attack, withdraw, attack again,’ Agapito said with a nod. ‘This is not my first battle, Lord Corax.’

The primarch smiled and shook his head.

‘Of course not. The longer you can remain fighting, the more forces will be drawn to you, and the further Loriark’s army can create an axis of attack for my assault. The temple is located in the starboard quadrant of the city. I will calculate the best routes and angles of attack to turn the enemy’s attention to the port districts and then I will swoop and claim the prize.’

‘I understand, lord,’ said Agapito. He banged a fist to his chest and bowed his head. ‘You can rely on the Talons.’

‘Do not allow yourselves to be surrounded, commander,’ Corax said with a grim expression. ‘There will be no reserves to break through to your position. Engage the enemy and lure them away from the temple. That is your only concern.’

Agapito nodded again, unsure if the primarch’s insistence was a sign of doubt or simply the wish to make certain that he was understood. There was no further assurance the commander could offer to his lord. If decades of valiant and dedicated service were not enough to convince Corax of his intent, words would not help.

Corax nodded a farewell and departed, leaving Agapito with mixed thoughts. The commander knew that if the primarch had serious doubts then he would have had no hesitation in replacing Agapito as commander; Caderil and others were quite prepared for the role. On the other hand, Agapito did not know if he could trust himself. The primarch had explicitly ordered that the Talons should not go after the Word Bearers, but if the Word Bearers came for them then he might not shun the opportunity to exact a little revenge.

The smog rising from Iapetus’s scores of chimneys and furnaces fouled the horizon, though the capital city itself was still out of sight. Atlas closed steadily on the dark smear, cruising five hundred metres above the sea. In the skies over both cities, clouds of aircraft circled like carrion birds sighting a carcass. The last peals of the warning sirens echoed along the empty streets of Atlas, sending stragglers dashing for the basements and bunkers cut into the bedrock of the city.

Beneath the constant groan of massive anti-grav engines came the rumbling of vehicle motors and the thud of booted feet, accompanied by the whine of bionically augmented warriors. Columns of skitarii gathered half a kilometre from the prow quays. Crews made final checks of their vehicles. Squad leaders called out the last muster rolls.

Inside the control chamber, Corax monitored the relative positions of the two barge-cities, a little less than fifty kilometres apart; two and a half hours, if Atlas continued at its current speed. Iapetus had hove to, remaining in place as Delvere waited for the insurrectionists to make their move.

'Extend fighter screen to thirty kilometres,' the primarch ordered. 'No recon overflights this time.'

A lexmechanic relayed the command in a dull monotone and a servitor burbled a burst of the tech-priests' argot – the *lingua-technis* – as a meaningless stream of piercing syllables and husky grunts. While the primarch waited patiently, Loriark paced back and forth behind him, hands lost in the sleeves of his robes as he clasped them at his waist, his strides short with agitation. Corax did not allow the magokritarch's behaviour to distract him; each man dealt with the nervous lull before battle in his own way and to force Loriark to cease his perambulations would only serve to perturb the tech-priest further.

Arms folded across his chest, Corax stared at the display screens and scanner panels, alert for any sign that would warn of Delvere's intent. It was likely that the archmagos was no veteran of war, but with the Word Bearer to guide him, he was not to be underestimated.

If there was one lesson that the primarch had taken from Isstvan V, it was never to expect victory as a right, and even as he cast a glance across flickering displays he gauged the mood of the overseeing tech-priests. For the moment they seemed calm enough, given the circumstances, but the coming battle afforded no room for hesitation or error.

Corax's way of war was finely tuned, the timings perfect, the manoeuvres precise. Though underlined with brutal simplicity – an encircling attack designed to separate the bulk of the enemy from Iapetus's main temple – the assault plans of the Raven Guard and skitarii were an intricately choreographed process devised through many hours of study of Iapetus's layout and what was known or could be supposed concerning the forces under Delvere's command.

'I searched your archives for precedents of this battle,' Corax said conversationally, attempting to engage Loriark and distract the tech-priest from whatever doom-laden scenarios he was considering. Even so, the primarch's gaze did not stray from the monitor banks. 'There was civil war on Constanix during the Long Night, but few details survive.'

'It is true.' Loriark's artificially modulated voice had only one volume and tempo, making it impossible to gauge his mood. 'Twelve hundred and sixty-eight years have passed since the Years of Peril and much that was known was destroyed in the war. The magi loyal to the purity of the Machine-God's creed prevailed, but at great cost. Data was lost that will never be recovered. A great setback to our cause.'

'You have studied the old recordings and logs?'

'I have spent much of my life with them, lord primarch,' said Loriark. It was impossible to know for sure, but it seemed that there was chastisement in the magos's posture and sharp gestures; perhaps resentment that Corax would think Loriark ignorant of his world's history. 'I am familiar with the accounts of inter-city battle. It seems destructive and wasteful of resources. The arrangement of the Cognoscenti is a far superior form of conflict resolution.'

'I agree.'

'Yet you are a warrior and a general, lord primarch. It is your nature to wage war.'

Corax paused before replying, telling himself that no insult was intended by the tech-priest, only observation. He chose his words carefully, trying to summarise a lifetime's philosophy in a few sentences.

‘War is a necessity to bring peace. Some of my brothers are warmakers, pure and simple, but I am not. Some, like Rogal Dorn, are architects, both of fortresses and of worlds. Guilliman’s empire stands testament to his abilities as statesman as well as warleader. The Emperor created us as perfect warriors and commanders, but the primarchs are far greater than simple warlords.’

‘And what do you build, lord primarch?’ Loriark’s dark eyes fixed Corax with a long stare. ‘If Horus had not turned, what would your legacy have been, if not a trail of conquered worlds, a multitude of widowed and orphaned people?’

‘I build hope, in the hearts of men and women. I show them that from the Long Night we can emerge into enlightenment. I never persecuted those I conquered and I never refused a surrender sincerely offered. I have shed the blood of the guilty and the innocent, laid waste to civilisations for the cause of the Emperor, but I never brought ruin needlessly. Each death was laid as a sacrifice to a better future, a life free from suppression and tyranny.’

‘Would not a tyrant claim the same? No man believes himself to do wrong.’

‘No tyrant would be willing to give up his power once all enemies were thwarted. I was prepared for just such an eventuality.’

‘I speak not of you, but the Emperor. What makes his vision of the galaxy any purer than that of Horus, or yours, or the Mechanicum’s? You may have been the weapon the Emperor used against a galaxy of foes, but it was his power that wielded you, unleashed your Legion against those that opposed him.’

Again Corax was forced to think for a moment, to formulate his reply so that a knot of instinct and simple *knowing* could be unravelled into something more reasoned.

‘The Emperor is all the things he wishes to be. He has been both tyrannical and compassionate, merciless and merciful. But I have seen into him, and I have touched minds with him in a way no other can. And at the core of what others see is a man of humility and wisdom and learning. He is a man driven by the rational. A tyrant craves domination, but the Emperor carries his power like a burden, the responsibility for all of humanity on his shoulders. He is everything he must be, not out of desire, but from duty and necessity.’

Loriark said nothing, and it was impossible to know whether he believed Corax or not. Talk of the Emperor always left Corax feeling grateful and humbled.

Grateful for the gene-father that had created him.

Humbled by the power of the ruler who had guided him.

The rebellion of the Warmaster and the primarchs who had sided with him made all the more clear the temptations and perils that came with near-unlimited power. Hunger for glory, desire for personal ambition, resentment and hatred had all taken their toll upon the mightiest creations of the Emperor. What effort of will did it take for the Emperor not to succumb to the same? What inhuman mind could spend millennia seeing the galaxy fall to ruin and yet never once abandon the vision of a greater future? Corax had been sorely tested, from the moment he had awoken in the ice caves of Lycaeus to this very second, but never could he come close to knowing the decisions that weighed so heavily upon his Imperial master.

Wrapped up with these thoughts, he regarded the monitors with some regret. More would die today, soldier and civilian alike. He could not count the numbers dead by his actions over a long lifetime of bloodshed. Billions, surely. Yet just as the Emperor carried the burden of his responsibility without complaint, so too would Corax.

And if ever true peace was to come, then he would look back on his bloody life without regret, knowing that the cause had always been just.

Agapito tapped out a quick beat on the plate of his leg armour as he waited in the confines of the

Shadowhawk. He made himself stop, conscious that it might be seen as a sign of nervousness and was probably irritating to the other Raven Guard, though none would ever voice complaint.

Two hours from Iapetus.

Two hours that would crawl past, his thoughts alive with possibilities: his death and the death of his companions; victory or defeat; vengeance or failure. He tried to move his thoughts elsewhere, to rites of battle and the layout of the target city. He mentally recited Corax's doctrines, but they were no longer the calming mantra they had once been.

Two hours, not of fear, but anticipation. He tapped his fingers not as a response to dread but in excitement.

Two hours until another battle. Two hours until the righteousness would claim him again and he could drown out the haunting cries of his dead brothers with the din of war.

Without conscious thought, his fingers started to tap again.

FIVE

Over the long decades of the Years of Peril, the barge-cities of Constanix II had evolved through a bloody process of weaponry and countermeasure, attack and defence, so that they had each become near-impregnable to the assaults of the others. Forced by bloody stalemate into consensus, the rulers of the tech-temples had not waged war since. Yet still there remained an ordained way to wage war between cities, a process that Corax had studied carefully, seeking to overturn the dogma of centuries of received wisdom.

The energy shields of Atlas and Iapetus rendered long-range attack a waste of energy and munitions – in order to maximise its capabilities of bombardment in an effort to overload an opponent's defences, a barge-city would first have to weaken its own shield to allow its guns to fire out, rendering it vulnerable to a swift counter-attack.

Instead of such artillery exchanges, the approach of Atlas to Iapetus was heralded by a battle in the skies.

The energy fields provided no barrier to aircraft and both sides wove tangled trails about each other as they attempted to bring their foundation-penetrating payloads over the enemy city. If one side gained the upper hand they would be able to target the power-field generators of the enemy, neutralising their defences and leaving them open to crushing waves of artillery and the devastating blasts of volcano cannons. Another option was to destroy the engines and grav-matrices that kept the enemy city afloat, but Corax had no desire to see Iapetus plunged into the sea. Not only would the loss of life be incredible, there was no guarantee that Delvere and his allies would not simply escape the destruction of the capital by gunship or other craft.

As the two air forces duelled overhead, scores of strike craft exchanged missile, bolter and heavy cannon fire, both attempting to pierce the cordon and pave a way for the heavier bombers and ground-attack craft. Explosions blossomed against the dark clouds and the burning trails of wrecked fighters and debris cut downwards towards the tossing ocean.

'Why are we slowing?' Corax asked as he noticed the soft nudge of deceleration. 'I gave no such order.'

'Until Iapetus's energy field has been weakened we must stand our ground,' replied Loriark. 'Power is being diverted to air defence turrets in case of enemy breakthrough. Delvere's aerial assets outnumber ours. We must take precautionary measures.'

'Continue at full speed,' Corax barked at the gaggle of tech-adepts standing by the city's engine controls.

He turned back to Loriark. 'I have no intention of waiting while we lose the aerial battle.'

'On our current course we will collide with Iapetus,' said the magokritarch, though whether this was a protest or simply an observation was unclear.

'That is my intent,' Corax replied. 'We will treat this as a boarding action. Perhaps the largest the galaxy will ever see. Atlas will ram Iapetus and then we will move ground forces over.'

'Ram?' The magos seemed put out by the simple word. 'It is more logical to render Iapetus's defence grid incapable and then dock at lower speed to precipitate the ground assault.'

'War is not always about logic, Loriark,' Corax said calmly.

'But if the enemy energy field is still operational, we will have to drop our own defences to prevent a feedback cycle of possibly devastating proportions.'

'How devastating?'

Loriark turned to the other tech-priests and there followed a brief crackling exchange of lingua-technis as they consulted with each other. Shaking his head, Loriark returned his attention back to Corax.

'We are unsure. Possibly catastrophic. Highly inadvisable.'

'War is a series of *intentional* catastrophes, magokritarch,' Corax said sternly. 'Continue at full speed, course set for Iapetus.'

No further protest was forthcoming, though more exchanges buzzed between the tech-priests as the order was carried out. Checking the main viewer, Corax could see Iapetus clearly, only three kilometres distant. The grey of the turbulent seas between the two barge-cities seemed to be growing smaller with a glacial slowness, but in truth Atlas was closing at nearly twenty kilometres per hour. Even if the merging of the energy shields did not cause widespread damage, the impact certainly would.

Alarms cried shrilly in the control chamber, and banks of lights flashed red.

A lexmechanic issued a proximity warning. 'Two hundred metres to power field overlap.'

Sirens sounded out across the city once more and the comm-net was filled with warnings for exposed troops to brace themselves and take whatever cover was available.

At one hundred metres the ionised air between the two energy shields crackled while the sea beneath began to churn, issuing fountains of acidic steam clouds hundreds of metres into the air.

At fifty metres, arcs of coloured lightning rippled across the narrowing space, the miniature storm boiling between the cities cracking and thundering like an artillery barrage in full effect.

As the outer edges of the two fields touched, a kilometre out from the prow of Atlas, the lightning formed two massive domes, one above each city. The sky seethed with energy and sparks danced over Corax's skin. Several tech-adepts stumbled and fell, two of them crying out as the electromagnetic charge permeating the atmosphere overloaded parts of their cybernetic bodies.

Loriark's voice projector emitted a high-pitched wail and forks of electricity coruscated along his bionic arm as he staggered backwards. Corax grabbed the front of his robe to prevent the tech-priest from falling, feeling a surge of voltage up his arm at the contact. Dark veins throbbed beneath the primarch's pale skin.

The temple was at the epicentre of the electrical storm, a miasma of power swirling about its summit. A twin tempest engulfed the main precinct of Iapetus, and the barge-cities shook as generators set into their foundations overheated.

Finally, they could take no more of the titanic pressure.

Atlas's starboard field generator exploded first, wiping out two empty tenement blocks and an abandoned manufactorum in a blast that rocketed debris half a kilometre into the air and showered dust and debris across two districts. A second detonation erupted in Seventh District at the rear of the barge-city, roaring out across the ocean, sending a kilometre of dockworks and quays arcing down into the sea.

Similar explosions were wracking Iapetus, toppling buildings and sending plumes of flame into the tormented air above the capital.

The combined energy fields exploded out with a deafening boom, sending waves as tall as a Titan rippling out across the ocean. Dog-fighting aircraft were thrown into spins and stalls by the blast.

'Open fire, all batteries!' snapped Corax, even as the tech-adepts dragged themselves back to their posts. 'Target enemy weapon arrays and the city perimeter. I want a blanket of fire to cover our approach.'

From turrets atop the main temple and spread through the city, macro-lasers and volcano cannons roared into action. Shells the size of battle tanks arced into the air towards Iapetus while ruby-coloured beams sprang into life between the two cities. Rocket launchers sent flaring missiles streaming across the gap by the score, twisting and turning towards their designated targets.

Flurries of explosions lit up the nearest sectors of the capital where the beams touched, cutting through armoured turrets and plated embrasures. The shells of the cannons fell, flattening buildings in a line along the port districts. Another second later and the rockets struck home, their warheads punching into the foundation of Iapetus before exploding, rending immense craters from the surface like bullet holes in flesh. Airburst shells and submunitions showered incendiary destruction onto the already wounded city, setting fires as gas lines and fuel tanks detonated while weaponry depots were torn to scattered rubble.

Delvere and his cohort were slower to react; the fourth salvo from Atlas was landing even as the capital's surviving guns returned fire. Atlas was rocked by the impacts, shuddering under the tonnage of shells descending upon its streets and buildings. Corax gritted his teeth as rockets slammed into the armoured sheath of the temple building, and he was glad that one of his first orders had been to plate over the ostentatious but vulnerable windows. Thick ceramite and ferrocrete cladding held, though the temple shook under the impacts sending several servitors and Mechanicum adepts sprawling.

The stormy exchange of artillery continued as Atlas closed with her target, lessening as counter-battery fire from each city destroyed the cannons and emplacements of the other. For more than five minutes the bombardments continued until both barge-cities were nothing more than ruined wastelands, dotted with shells of buildings like ragged teeth, destroyed power plants and factories belching smoke and fumes.

Corax knew that there would be casualties, but he did not need to know the details. The point of commitment had been reached the moment they had set course for Iapetus; now all that remained was to endure the pain and see his charges through to victory. Later the losses could be mourned, but for the moment his entire intellect and will was bent towards the destruction of his enemies.

Agapito had clambered up to the cockpit to look out of the canopy after the first shell impacts. He had seen many sights in his battle-strewn life, both stirring and dismal, but the sight of two cities blasting each other to pieces pretty much eclipsed them all. Perhaps only a full fleet bombardment from orbit could match the sheer amount of firepower being unleashed.

The jagged, tangled remains of Iapetus's docks loomed large in his view. The capital was trying to rise up, hoping to avoid the coming collision, but Atlas was ascending also, driving on directly towards the enemy-held city. Only a few hundred metres separated the two gigantic craft and the commander made his way back to the main compartment and lowered himself into the brace harness.

'Get ready for launch. Pilot, I want to be airborne before these two bastards meet head-on.'

'*Affirmative, commander*,' replied Stanz.

'This is Agapito to all commands – prepare for assault.'

A series of confirmations echoed back across the vox as he spread his fingers, forcing himself to relax. He pulled his power sword free from the stanchion above his head and laid it across his lap, fingers creating a rattling tattoo along its ebony sheath.

The waiting was almost over.

Agapito felt the Shadowhawk taxiing out of the armoured bunker where it had been hidden, and a few seconds later felt it rising up into the air. He turned his head to look out of the slit-like viewing port beside him. There was almost nothing to see through the haze of fire and smoke, but where the gusting winds parted the clouds, he watched as Atlas rammed Iapetus.

The barrage-ravaged prow of the barge-city ploughed into the equally ruined dockyards of the capital. Spars and the wreckage of loading cranes bent like grass in a wind while armoured plates sheared into each other, sending metre-long splinters spinning through the air. As the cities seemed to drop away beneath him, Agapito could see more – chasms opening up along the roads, splitting the gutted remnants of buildings.

A huge cloud of dust was thrown up by the impact, engulfing the Shadowhawk and sending it lurching to port while debris rattled against the hull.

'*Losing trim. This is going to be tricky*,' Stanz warned.

A moment later the turbulence threw the drop-ship to starboard. Restraining harnesses creaked and the Raven Guard muttered curses as they were tipped over, the hull clanging with impacts, the groan of straining metal reverberating around them.

While Stanz wrestled the craft out of its wild roll, Agapito glanced out of the vision slit again. Tall buildings on both sides of the collision were toppling towards each other, slow and majestic yet terrible to witness. He knew that much of Atlas's populace was safe deep into the foundation of the city, but had Delvere shown similar concern for the citizens of the capital? It seemed unlikely. In all probability, thousands were dying.

The concern was soon replaced with another emotion. Agapito flexed his gauntleted fingers and wrapped them around his sword, and smiled as the calm hatred of righteousness gripped him.

The smoke bank blotting out the sky above Iapetus was cut by the shape of a dozen sleek craft arrowing towards the centre of the city. Shadowhawks and Whispercutters slid almost invisibly down through the miasma, yet this was no stealth approach. Heavy weapons fire spewed from the craft as they skimmed across the rooftops and angled down the ruined streets, spitting death into the traitor skitarii beneath. Plasma bombs rained down from a Stormbird while two dart-like interceptors raked along the wide roads with anti-tank rockets and autocannons.

Agapito wanted the enemy to know exactly where he was.

Jets blaring, the Shadowhawks descended into the central plaza, dominated by the mangled remains of great abstract sculptures once raised in praise to the Machine-God's artifices. There seemed to be not a building left intact, the pavements and streets scattered with debris, blocked in places where taller edifices had collapsed to their foundations. The drop-ships hovered a few metres above the uneven ground while their cargoes of black-armoured warriors disembarked, spilling out in a wave with jump packs flaring. Whispercutters circled noiselessly overhead, piloted by simple machine-spirits that relayed visual, audio and scanner information across the strategy-net to the Raven Guard leaders.

With practised ease the assault force dispersed, moving into the buildings while heavy weapons squads laid down covering fire from amidst the rubble, driving back the disorganised and scattered defenders.

Quickly, relentlessly, the Raven Guard pushed on, grenade blasts and flamer bursts heralding their progress as they moved from one shattered chamber to another.

There were bodies crushed amongst the debris, but Agapito ignored them as he led the first squad into the next set of ruins – the tumbled remains of a wire-production facility. Articulated conveyor belts and lifting engines protruded from the piles of broken masonry and twisted plasteel rebar.

A heavily armoured combat servitor stood watch from above, unleashing a stream of fire from its heavy

bolters as the commander ducked through the remains of a doorway. It seemed unlikely to have clambered up to the higher floor by itself and must have miraculously survived when the rest of the building had come crashing down.

Bolts flaring from the rubble around him, Agapito cut to the right, drawing the fire of the mindless half-man. He fired his jump pack and leapt up to the next storey as return fire from a squad on the ground floor converged on the sentry machine. The white beam of a lascannon sheared through its tracks, scattering links and the molten remnants of broad-spoked wheels, slicing the servitor from waist to neck.

Moving up further, Agapito sought a vantage point from which to view the city. Reaching the pinnacle of a shattered stairway, he was able to see back towards Atlas and across the city to the towering edifice of the main temple.

The lightning insertion by the Raven Guard had achieved complete surprise, but the defenders of Iapetus were now responding. A trio of lightly armed walkers rounded a junction three hundred metres down the street. They had bulbous sensor lenses, like glittering spider eyes, and an array of communications dishes and antennae.

'Recon walkers,' the commander told the company. 'Let them see us and then destroy them.'

Sergeant Varsio led his squad out into the street, bounding with their jump packs from one heap of rubble to another directly in front of the enemy spy vehicles. The recon walkers turned as one, false eyes sparkling as they locked on to the moving figures. Half a minute passed as Varsio and his warriors disappeared into the ruin of a flattened hab-block opposite; enough time for the scouts to signal back their discovery.

Missiles and plasma fire erupted from the upper levels of a nearby shuttle-docking port, punching through the walkers' thin armour with ease and turning them into three smoking wrecks in a matter of seconds.

'Good. Designate main temple as bearing zero. Insertion point is grid one. Company, relocate to grids four and six. Cannat, Garsa and Hasul, break right and set up a welcoming party by that communications tower at the end of the roadway.'

The ad hoc company moved as ordered, forming a rough perimeter around a square kilometre of city with the central plaza at its heart.

It was not long before the skitarii arrived, the lead elements transported in tracked open-topped carriers that were easy targets for the heavy weapons that had been moved into position to greet them. Part-cybernetic warriors spilled from the burning remains of the two lead vehicles while the others quickly tried to reverse, only to be caught in a crossfire of plasma grenades and bolter fire from a pair of Raven Guard squads that had moved in behind them through the cover of a demolished hab-complex.

The rest of the counter-attacking force approached more cautiously. Agapito moved from position to position, ensuring that the lines of sight of each squad were maximised, creating killing grounds where possible, leaving some routes open to encourage the enemy to venture further forwards than was safe. He had studied under Corax himself and attended to the fine detail of his force's disposition with the same care with which a tech-priest might administer maintenance to the circuitry of a cogitator.

As he moved, he assessed the enemy strength. About five hundred infantry, moving ahead of a dozen battle tanks and three support guns. The vehicle commanders were understandably wary of advancing too far into the mess of broken buildings and haphazard rubble piles, instead sending in the infantry brigade to clear a path first.

Agapito detailed three squads to follow him as he dropped down to ground level. They gathered in the shadow of a leaning rail stanchion; the rest of the bridge had fallen to block the road behind them. Picking their way sure-footedly through the debris, the Raven Guard circled to the left around the incoming squads

of infantry. Concealed by the pall of smoke, using their heat-detecting autosenses to track the progress of their foes, they waited.

A minute later, the Raven Guard stationed around the enemy line of advance opened fire, tearing into the infantry with their bolters. Several dozen were cut down in the opening salvo. Not willing to stay in the open, the Mechanicum soldiers broke ranks and moved into the cover of the shattered buildings, and it was then that Agapito made his move. Splitting his force, the commander led the charge into the enemy, power sword in one hand, plasma pistol in the other.

Though their bonded plasteel breastplates and bionic limbs made the skitarii superior to the unaugmented soldiers of the Imperial Army, they were no match for thirty-one warriors of the Legiones Astartes. Agapito did not use his pistol, instead hewing down a handful of foes in the first few seconds of the combat. Fragmentation grenades exploded ahead of him as another squad charged into the fray, shrapnel from the charges combining with splinters from the littered masonry in a deadly firestorm.

In a hail of bolter shots, chainsword swings and savage punches the Raven Guard cleaved into the foe without pause. Those enemies that chose to retreat from the assault strayed into the fire of the legionaries still waiting behind, and in minutes all but a handful lay dead or dying. A few black-armoured Legion warriors lay amongst the fallen, taken out by lucky blows or desperate hacks from the power weapons of the skitarii squad leaders, but Agapito quickly calculated the kill ratio to be a satisfactory seventy-to-one or more.

Robbed of their infantry support the tanks withdrew, covering their retreat with a barrage of shells from main guns and a hail of las-fire from secondary weapons, creating even more dust and debris but inflicting no casualties upon the Raven Guard.

As the growl of engines receded, Agapito could hear the thump of larger guns in the distance – the main advance of Atlas's own troops. Five hundred infantry and three scout walkers was nowhere near enough damage to ease the attack of the Mechanicum acolytes. The commander needed to make even more of an impact if the enemy were to be drawn into a full attack.

He activated his command link to the patrolling Whispercutters overhead, half of his visual display flicking from one to the next as he built up a sense of the surrounding enemy forces. A sizeable combined column was advancing from bearing one-seventy, almost directly opposite the approach to the tech-temple, about a kilometre away and coming closer.

They were of little concern for the moment.

Of more interest was the Warhound-class Scout Titan picking its way along a rubble-strewn street two kilometres to his left, at bearing two-six-five. With it came assault guns and at least a thousand infantry, many of them with praetorian upgrades, supported by tracked Rapier laser destroyers, mobile rocket pods and other heavy weaponry.

'Regroup, grid seven,' he commanded, shutting down the link. 'Shadowhawk command, interdiction strike on Titan advancing through grid four-six. Assault group, follow, attack vector eight, two-two, two-three. Stealth approach. It's time to make our presence really felt.'

'Progress is too slow,' growled Corax, turning an angry stare towards Loriark. 'Your skitarii have to make ground quicker and push the enemy towards the left flank.'

'I shall pass on your instructions, lord primarch, but they are facing stubborn opposition.'

'The longer you take, the more stubborn it will get. Advance quickly and the defenders do not have time to reinforce their positions against your attack.'

Loriark said nothing but simply bowed his head in acquiescence and returned to conferring with his fellow tech-priests.

Corax glowered at the main display. The bulk of Atlas's forces had been committed and still they had made no more than four kilometres into Iapetus's streets. For two hours of fighting it simply was not good enough and the primarch had expected better.

He focused on the rune-shapes depicting the locations of his Raven Guard and felt more positive. Agapito and his Talons had been making themselves a constant aggravation to Delvere's forces, pushing closer and closer towards the archmagos's temple whilst drawing skitarii away from the fight with Atlas's army. It could not continue indefinitely, though; sooner or later Loriark's soldiers would have to break through to Agapito or the Raven Guard would eventually be caught and destroyed.

Corax stared at the screen as if by will alone he could alter the course of the battle.

Agapito had lost around a fifth of his command, but now the enemy were taking the Raven Guard seriously. More and more infantry in particular had been streaming back through the streets, as if to swamp the Space Marines by numbers alone. Intelligence from the two Whispercutters that still remained airborne pointed to a mass assault coming from the right, which would push the Raven Guard towards the ruined dockyards at the city's edge.

Alert to the danger, Agapito ordered the assault force to contract on his position, to create a single, mobile element that would be able to extract at a moment's notice. The beast that was Delvere's forces had finally been roused to strike with all its power and it would not serve the Raven Guard's purpose to be caught out of position when the blow landed.

Leaping across shattered rooftops with his jump pack, Agapito rejoined his warriors as they gathered in the buildings surrounding a massive wreckage-filled crater. Overhead the Shadowhawks blurred past, becoming concealed once more until they were needed to strike. By the commander's reckoning, nearly six thousand troops and at least a hundred battle-engines were now preparing to launch an all-out frontal attack. The Raven Guard would withdraw in the face of the first assault and circle back to grid one at the plaza, dragging the enemy closer to the most advanced prong of the Atlas assault and away from the archmagos's temple.

To confirm the rationale of his plan he took another look through the artificial eyes of the Whispercutters, watching for any detail that he had missed. He saw nothing unexpected and was about to cut the link when a blur of colour caught his eye – dark red against the grey shroud of smog. He sent a signal up to the armoured glider, turning it in a tight circle to come from the other direction.

It revealed red-armoured figures advancing through shattered buildings a kilometre away, slightly apart from the main body of defenders. Switching to the thermal view, he counted more than fifty signals: the distinctive heat plumes of legionaries at a fast run.

The Word Bearers had come to deal with the Raven Guard. They were trying to outflank them.

The rage started as a swelling of heat in his gut, spreading through his body as the thought of vengeance took hold in the commander's mind. As with the discovery of the *Kamiel*, providence was offering an opportunity to avenge his fallen brothers on Isstvan V. In the Whispercutter display fluttered a banner, ragged and soiled, but unmistakably covered in golden script surrounding a bright red laurel on a white field.

Agapito had seen that same banner amongst the ranks of Lorgar's whelps at the Isstvan dropsite, held proudly aloft as the Word Bearers had turned their guns upon their cousins in the Raven Guard. In the weeks that followed the massacre, a brutal XVII Legion Chapter commander named Elexis had been dogged in his persecution of the surviving Raven Guard. Despite Agapito's entreaties to the primarch, every opportunity to strike back had slipped away… But now, Elexis had come to Constanix II. Memories crowded into the commander's thoughts, each a tableau of destruction and death clamouring for his

attention. His battle-brothers' cries grew louder in his ears, the smell of blood and burnt ceramite strengthened in his nostrils.

He gripped the hilt of his power sword tightly, his breath coming in short, rasping gasps. This was a second chance: Agapito would slay the bearer of that banner and see the colours cast down and trodden underfoot; Elexis crushed as his own Legion had once been crushed.

'*Commander?*' Lieutenant Caderil's voice was loud across the vox, filled with concern. '*Commander, the enemy are moving within range*.'

Every fibre of Agapito called out for him to order the attack and he knew that the Talons would gladly obey once they saw the target. His hearts hammered and blood throbbed through his body, flushing him with rage.

A detonation rocked the building across the street as the first of the skitarii war engines clanked into range, sending an avalanche of smashed masonry onto the road.

Agapito barely noticed the explosion.

He was here to avenge; to punish; to kill.

Yet at the burning heart of his anger there was a cold core, formed of pure hatred. It did not fuel his rage but cut through it, gifting him with clarity, shredding the fugue of ire that clouded his thoughts.

'Victory is vengeance,' the commander muttered.

'*Please repeat, commander, what are your orders?*'

'Victory is vengeance,' Agapito said, louder and more confidently. He could see the traitors with his own eyes now, a few hundred metres away, cutting through a bombarded district temple. Beyond them he spied larger shapes moving through the gloom of the smoke: Mechanicum reinforcements. If the Raven Guard attacked, then they would certainly be surrounded, even if they destroyed the Word Bearers.

Cold, rational hatred won over blind fury.

'Withdraw to grid one, at speed.' He issued the order through gritted teeth, as though the words were forcing themselves from his throat under protest.

'*Affirmative, commander*,' replied Caderil, sounding relieved.

The Raven Guard ran and bounded away into the darkness, leaving Agapito to stare at the Word Bearers in the distance, their banner to the fore.

'Tomorrow, Elexis – you gutless coward. Tomorrow, you find out how the Raven Guard fight when we don't have our backs turned. Tomorrow, I'll show you bastards the same mercy you showed us on Isstvan.'

SIX

Lightning claws spitting sparks, Corax slashed the head from another cyborg praetorian and stepped over the twitching corpse to meet its companions. Flanking him, two squads of legionaries laid down a swathe of bolter and heavy bolter fire, explosive rounds cutting through more of the skitarii elite.

The Iapetus central temple complex covered more than a square kilometre of the city, the main ziggurat surrounded by smaller forges and furnace-houses. While a pair of Shadowhawks conducted attack runs against the few remaining defence turrets on the boundary wall, Corax and his warriors drove into the Mechanicum cultists. Las-fire, bullets and bolts criss-crossed through the fumes and smoke, the surrounding buildings ringing to the cacophony of battle. Higher up, amongst the plumes of smoke rising from the city, Fire Raptors patrolled, watchful for any shuttle or gunship that tried to escape from the Machine-God's shrine.

Amongst the praetorians moved squads of heavily armoured foes: soldiers whose armour had been bonded into their flesh, their bodies turned into weapons. Bolter fire sparked harmlessly from ferrous carapaces while the brutally augmented warriors returned fire with arcs of lightning and blasts of plasma. Thallaxii, they were called – more machines than men, nerves deadened to withstand the agony of the insertion into their armour, the lobes of their brains replaced with calculating machines, turning them into efficient, unfeeling slayers.

Corax hurtled into the thallaxii as his Raven Guard pulled back, four black-armoured legionaries slain by the enemy's devastating weapons. A plasma bolt smashed into Corax's left shoulder, burning through the ceramite of his armour to set a fire of pain in his arm. He ignored it and took to the air, his flight pack flaring as he leapt skywards. Twisting, he dived into the midst of the thallaxii like a comet, claws scything to the left and right, armoured boots cracking open reinforced exoskeletons.

Heartened by their primarch's attack the Raven Guard followed in his wake, emptying magazines at full-automatic into the stricken Mechanicum warriors, pouring more and more firepower into those that managed to evade Corax's assault. One by one the thallaxii were shredded by lightning claws and weapons fire, yet still they fought to the last warrior rather than retreating.

The assault force was still coming under considerable fire from embrasures atop the temple and other buildings. Corax split the platoon, sending one squad towards a large forge-house to the right, taking the others with him as he headed directly for the main temple doors.

'Primarch!'

Corax turned at the shout of alarm, just in time to see three immense mechanical beasts issuing from the furnace chamber. Each was larger than a battle tank, standing on six mechanical limbs, a plethora of cannons and guns dotting their oddly shaped hulls. What looked like muscle and sinew glistened between their ceramite-sheathed plates, slick with organic fluid. The war engines were armed with huge claws, spinning saw discs and serrated, glowing blades. Worst of all, their armour was carved with strange icons, disturbing runes that writhed with a dark energy of their own. Corax had seen similar upon the battleplate of Lorgar and his legionaries, and knew immediately what the sigils were for: to bind the power of Chaos into mortal form.

The Raven Guard stood transfixed by the half-daemon creations charging towards them. Corax took a breath – the warnings of the tech-priests did little justice to the horror of the raging behemoths themselves.

The daemonically powered engines issued bizarre roars and howls as they fell upon the Raven Guard squad with blades and talons slashing. The legionaries stood no chance against the arachnoid giants, their bolts and blades ineffective against the inscribed armour of their attackers.

Corax broke into a sprint, powering straight for the war engines, claws ready for the attack. He arrived too late – the last of the Raven Guard squad was hurled bodily through the air by a kick from one of the machines, to land several dozen metres away on the hard rockcrete.

With a snarl of pure rage, Corax launched himself at the closest engine.

It met his claws with its own. Lightning rippled over the mechanical beast's segmented plating. Warp-powered servos contested against genhanced muscles, Corax gritting his teeth and the daemon engine letting forth a moaning cry that was more animal than machine.

The raw power of the primarch prevailed over the warp's artifice as Corax slashed through the engine's arm, sending the claw clattering across the ground. Punching a fist into what might have been its chest, the primarch heaved up to his full height, turning the machine to the left. It flailed its good arm, a hissing blue blade passing within centimetres of Corax's face, and its legs spasmed as it tried to stay upright.

With a grunt, Corax hauled the creature onto its back and drove his other fist into its underbelly, parting armour plates with his claws. Bubbling green, oily fluid spurted from the wound as pneumatics wheezed and the mortally wounded creature emitted a piercing wail.

As Corax pulled his hands free, something seized his right arm from behind. He was lifted into the air as another claw grabbed hold of his leg. Aloft, he had no purchase to fight against the second daemon engine's grip. Armour buckled and cracked under the strain, pressure fractures splintering along the length of the primarch's arm and leg.

He twisted as best he could and lashed out with his free claw, slicing through trailing hydraulic cables. The claw holding his leg snapped open, leaving him dangling by one arm. Before he could repeat the move, the war engine swung the primarch groundwards, dashing him hard against the rockcrete. Stunned, Corax could do nothing as twice more he was slammed into the ground, his shoulder almost separating with each swing from the daemon engine.

The third machine closed in, its circular blades spinning. But before it could attack, twin explosions rocked it from behind. The roar of plasma jets drowned out its pained cry as a Shadowhawk descended, heavy bolters spewing fire. Another missile streaked down, punching into a rent in the daemon-thing's armour, detonating the ammunition stores inside its segmented carapace.

Pain spearing into his chest from his injured shoulder, Corax bent his arm and swung both feet into the frontal hull of the daemon holding him. The impact thundered a deep dent into the red-painted metal, but more importantly it gave the primarch the leverage he needed.

Firing his flight pack, he thrust away from the machine, his free lightning claw carving through the

appendage holding him. The armature came away in a shower of black sparks, cabling and vile fluid spilling from the tear. Letting the twitching mechanical limb drop from his fingers, Corax climbed high into the air and then dropped like a stone, using his own bulk to slam into the top of the war machine.

The daemonic construct exploded as if hit by a shell, the fireball scattering machine parts and burning fuel. As the flames dissipated, Corax was left crouching in the ruin, scorched but alive, his pale skin blackened with oil and soot.

Knowing that Delvere, and possibly Nathrakin, would not be far from their daemonic creations, he headed towards the forge from where the machines had emerged.

The broad gates of the furnace-house were open, revealing a hellish scene within. Lit by a reddish-purple light was what seemed to be a monstrous assembly line for gigantic mechanical spiders. Limbs and curved armour plates hung from cranes and lifting chains, while beneath worked gangs of cowled labourers and servitors. Those capable of free thought threw down their tools and fled as Corax stalked into the horrific interior, while the more mindless drones continued with the tasks they were programmed to carry out, oblivious to the killer in their midst.

A squad of Word Bearers charged out of the gloom, their bolters blazing. Impacts showered Corax but he shrugged off the detonations and lunged towards the traitor legionaries, spearing the first on the tip of his claw, and shearing the head and arm from a second. As he carved down the third, Corax could see over the heads of the renegades, into the depths of the infernal forge.

The walls were lined with cages, inside which naked figures stared blankly out. Their bodies were smeared with grime and blood – blood from deep rune-wounds carved into their flesh. They moaned in desperation, pushing hands through the bars of their prisons, shorn heads gleaming in the unnatural light. The cages themselves were hung with long ropes of knotted cable that flared and sparked as if siphoning off their misery, and the cables trailed in chained loops towards the depths of the forge.

At the far end had been raised a grotesque pedestal, an amalgam of metal, stone, bones and skulls, connected to the prison cages. Strangely angled artificial stalagmites jutted from this pile, forming huge barbs whose lengths were carved with more of the damnable runes. Between them the air shimmered with unnatural energy, flooding the furnace hall with the pulsing un-light of the immaterium.

A chainsword snapped against Corax's thigh and he struck out with the back of his fist, launching a Word Bearer across the chamber to slam into a dangling engine block. A kick smashed in the chest of another traitor even as Corax's claws swept down to eviscerate a third.

Beside the swirling miasma of the warp rift stood two figures. The first Corax recognised from the descriptions Loriark had given him – it was clearly Delvere. The archmagos was robed in red, like his fellows, his face hidden in the shadow of his hood. From his back splayed half a dozen writhing mechadendrites, each tipped with some sparking, whirring device or hooked, serrated blade.

The other figure could only be Nathrakin, clad in thick Terminator armour painted in the livery of the Word Bearers and chased with golden runes and lines of cuneiform script. He wore no helm, and his scalp and neck were pierced with snaking coils of wires and cables that pulsed under the flesh, glowing with psychic power. A former Librarian, no doubt, now turned sorcerer.

As the last of the Word Bearers fell to Corax, the primarch raised a claw towards the pair and shouted his challenge.

'Ask for swift deaths and I will grant them.' He stalked between the lines of mechanical parts and imprisoned human suffering.

'Too late to ask for clemency?' Nathrakin called back.

'*No mercy,*' snarled Corax, breaking into a run.

The pair of renegades split. Delvere stood his ground, raising his bionic arms to lift an oversized rotor cannon towards the onrushing primarch. Nathrakin strode up the mound of the Chaos altar and with a contemptuous glance back at Corax thrust his hand into the whirling vortex.

Delvere's first salvo screamed down the hall, forcing Corax to his left as wicked shells flickered towards him. The prisoners let out great howls of agony as the stray shots ripped into them, punching through flesh where the infernal shells set dark fires in their bodies, burning swiftly until they were all but consumed.

Changing his route, Corax leapt up amongst the hanging machine parts, steering his flight pack between the swinging chains and swaying carapaces. Delvere's next volley tore into the rafters above, splitting metal links and cutting through armoured plates.

Corax landed next to the archmagos as burning rounds seared past the primarch's head, his lightning claw slashing through the spinning barrels of the cannon with a single blow. Delvere's mechadendrite tentacles lashed forwards like a nest of serpents, striking a flurry of hits across Corax's chest and shoulder, their combined strength enough to hurl him back several metres. The primarch swept out with a lightning claw, cutting the ends from half of the tendrils and eliciting a snarl of pain from the archmagos.

As Delvere reeled back, his remaining mechadendrites undulating wildly, Corax struck. He pounced forwards, left claw held out like a lance, blades and taloned fingers punching into the chest of the archmagos. Digits like steel ripped through plates of metal and mechanical organs, tearing through a plasteel-ribbed spine to erupt from Delvere's back. The archmagos screeched in staccato lingua-technis as Corax lifted him up.

'The punishment for traitors is death,' the primarch growled.

He swept his other claw across the head of Delvere, severing vertebrae and shearing away the top of his scalp. Letting the decapitated corpse drop to the ground, Corax rounded on Nathrakin.

The Word Bearer stood in front of the pulsing warp portal, red and purple flames flickering along his arm. Tendrils of unnatural power lashed at him from the sphere of glowing energy, seeming to pass into his body, leaving pulsating trails beneath his skin. His face was locked in a rictus grimace, eyes burning with fire.

The plates of his Terminator armour slewed and melted, bubbling like scalded flesh, expanding and merging. As more warp power flowed into him, Nathrakin grew in stature, limbs lengthening, torso widening. Claws like steel erupted from his fingertips and three curling horns sprouted from his brow, each tipped with a golden rune. The backplate and power pack of his armour extended, extrusions of ceramite and adamantium forming a serrated arch above his head like a deformed halo.

Corax took a step towards the traitor but stopped, wary of coming too close to the ravening energies spewing from the warp rift. Violet and green shadows danced around the Word Bearer's feet.

Wrenching his hand from the pulsating globe of energy, Nathrakin took several paces towards the primarch. Where his boots touched the melded skulls and bones, they left pools of black flame. He lifted his arms and smiled, as four adamantium-edged bone-blades erupted from each of his wrists, in a twisted parody of Corax's own talons.

When he spoke, the warped traitor's voice was deep, reverberating across the hall, resonant with echoes of power.

'You have met your match, primarch,' Nathrakin taunted. He let his arms drop, flames springing up from his fists, burning with black fire. 'Nothing can withstand the power of Immortal Chaos.'

'Let's test that boast, traitor filth.'

All apprehension gone, Corax leapt at Nathrakin, claws extended. With a speed that nearly matched the primarch's, the sorcerer stepped aside, striking out with his arm-blades to score a welt across Corax's

plackart. Without pause, Corax regained his balance and pivoted as Nathrakin slammed into him, driving the two of them down the pile of the unholy altar.

Corax rammed a knee up into his enemy's gut, lifting Nathrakin from the ground and releasing his grip. A tenebrous vapour flowed from the warp portal, surrounding the sorcerer with a pulsing aura as he pushed himself back to his feet, flexing his talons, a slender tendril connecting him with the rift.

Nathrakin laughed.

'You see? Any mortal, even a Space Marine, would have been slain by that blow alone. You have not even winded me, Corax. How does it feel to face your last battle?'

Corax struck as a blur, raining blows down upon the upstart champion of Chaos, claws raking and slashing in a frenzy against Nathrakin's upraised arms, shredding armour and showering blood. The primarch's attack drove him away from the portal step by step, but still the immaterial tether linking the Word Bearer to the source of his power remained.

'Enough!' Nathrakin's roar almost deafened Corax. The sorcerer struck out with a straight punch that connected with the primarch's jaw, hurling him back a dozen metres to crash into a hanging mechanical leg. Black flame crawled across the primarch's face, trying to eat into his flesh, stinging his eyes.

'Never enough,' Corax replied grimly as the flames on his face guttered out. 'You will never defeat me.'

The two charged at each other, but at the last moment Corax jumped, igniting his pack to execute a twisting somersault over his opponent. Landing behind Nathrakin, Corax rammed both sets of claws into the traitor's back. Lightning crackled across armour-flesh, blood boiling from the wound as steam.

Corax's wings flattened as he bounded straight up, the flare of rockets propelling them both into the broad girders that held up the furnace hall's roof. Turning and spinning, the primarch slammed Nathrakin against the rafters, smashing his head upon steel, ramming him bodily into the struts. The Chaos champion screamed, from frustration rather than pain, unable to bring his talons to bear against his attacker.

Turning groundwards, the primarch dived, driving himself and Nathrakin into the floor like a meteor. The shockwave of their impact set the chains and hanging engine components clanging and banging. Withdrawing his claws, Corax stood over the traitor and stomped on him, crashing his foot again and again into Nathrakin's back, the bare rockcrete floor beneath him cracking and splintering.

The champion of Chaos lay still and Corax stepped back, breathing heavily. He listened. The faint beating of twin hearts still pulsed. Shallow rasps of breath still passed Nathrakin's lips.

In the moment before Corax could strike again, Nathrakin rolled onto his back, fists thrust out. Ebon fire spewed from his hands, splashing across Corax's face and chest, driving him back. Regaining his feet, Nathrakin laughed once more.

'Is that all you can offer, Corax? To think that you almost bested Lord Aurelian.'

Corax looked at the Word Bearer. His armour was buckled and rent, blood streaming from dozens of wounds. His face was little more than mashed flesh – lips split, teeth broken, nose flattened. One of his horns had snapped.

'You seem to be a poor judge of who is winning this fight,' the primarch said. 'I am only just getting started.'

The two charged at each other again, claws clashing against talons with a fountain of electricity and warp energy spraying into the air. Corax came face to face with his enemy, slowly pushing Nathrakin's fists closer and closer, the primarch's claws edging towards the traitor's throat.

'Let's see you boast with no head, renegade scum. I will destroy every warp-spawned, Chaos-tainted creature in the galaxy before I die.'

Nathrakin's ruby gaze flickered away from Corax's for a moment, quickly glancing down at the crackling blades only millimetres from his throat.

'You should start your hunt a little closer to home, primarch.'

The sorcerer looked directly into Corax's eyes, and the primarch saw himself reflected there: a giant with white skin and eyes like coal.

Nathrakin laughed. 'Did you think the primarchs were something *pure*?'

In that moment Corax thought of the poor Raptors that had been mutated by his gene-seed tampering and suddenly feared just what it was that he had unleashed in them. Was their bestial appearance something to do with the raw primarch genes he had used?

Nathrakin sensed his hesitation and sneered.

'How could the Emperor create such demigods with science alone? Warriors that can withstand tank shells? Leaders whose every word must be obeyed? Creatures with powers far beyond any Thunder Warrior or legionary? Why do you think the Emperor decided not to simply recreate his children when they were lost? What unique gifts of darkness did he pass to you?'

Corax's moment of doubt was all Nathrakin needed. With a triumphant bellow, the Word Bearer threw back the primarch, revealing scorch marks across his throat. Droplets of black fire dripped from his bone-blades as he advanced.

'Lorgar saw the truth! Time that you saw it too. Accept the nature of Chaos and join your brothers on the true path of righteousness.'

Corax had heard enough, and lashed out with astounding speed.

'Silence!'

Caught up in his taunting, Nathrakin reacted too slowly. A lightning claw swept the Word Bearer's head from his shoulders and sent it flying into the gloom.

Panting, Corax lowered into a crouch, shaking his head. The traitor had been lying, trying to save his skin. The Emperor was sworn to destroy Chaos – he had told Corax that himself. Flickers of memory from the Emperor pushed at Corax's consciousness; images of his creator in his laboratory tending to the nascent zygotes that would become his immortal gene-sons.

'No.' Corax stood up, his doubts dissipating. The Emperor could not have lied, but he would have seen it. 'I am no creature of Chaos.'

He noticed then that the aura surrounding Nathrakin's corpse was thickening, the tendril of warp energy undulating from the warp portal moving more quickly.

The body twitched.

Corax felt a chill of anxiety as he heard a quiet chuckle.

Nathrakin's mangled breastplate was moving, his abdomen splitting into a maw lined with adamantium teeth, ruby eyes pushing out from his pectorals. A thin, serpentine tongue slid over needle-like fangs as the Chaos champion sat up.

'*Chaosh cannot be deshtroyed,*' lisped the deformed mouth, lips of ceramite moulding from the armour. '*It ish eternal.*'

Corax shook his head in disbelief as Nathrakin pushed himself to his feet. With a shudder, a sting-tipped tail erupted from behind him, swinging up over his shoulder. The stump of his neck grew metal barbs, forming a bestial mouth. The black flames engulfed his hands once more.

'*Shubmit or be shlain. It is that shimple.*'

Taking two strides, Corax punched the claws of his right fist into the fallen champion's new face and lifted him up. Black fire streamed around the two of them as Nathrakin screeched and pounded his talons against the primarch's head and face, tearing at skin and flesh and metal. Corax ignored the pain and staggered towards the open warp rift.

'Chaos may be immortal,' he snarled, heaving the Word Bearer towards the portal. 'Flesh is not.'

With a roar, Corax threw Nathrakin into the swirling globe of energy.

It flashed bright as the Word Bearer seemed to stick to its surface. Daemonic faces appeared from within the shimmering sphere, laughing and leering. Clawed hands grabbed the sorcerer and dragged him deeper into its depths, until he was obscured by the crackling energy.

Corax struck out, smashing down the nearest stalagmite sustaining the rift. He whirled around the monstrous altar, claws crashing through the upthrusts of metal and bone, the portal pulsing more and more wildly as each was toppled. As the final jutting spike was severed, the rift imploded. Corax felt the shock of it at the core of his being, as though a fist had clenched around his heart.

The moment passed.

'Lies,' he muttered, turning away. 'The Emperor told me that too – lies and deceit are the only weapons Chaos truly wields.'

Yet the words sounded hollow as he spoke them, for he also knew that the most convincing lies were those wrapped around a core of truth.

The wounds on his face itched and his shoulder was sore, but there was still fighting to be done. Iapetus was not yet claimed for the Emperor.

Corax attacks the corrupted Mechanicum constructs

EPILOGUE

Corax stood upon the bridge of the *Kamiel*, alone with Sagitha Alons Neortallin.

'Iapetus is under my control and those who did this to you are dead,' he told the Navigator. 'The Mechanicum have a ship that I can use to rejoin my Legion. Know peace.'

The primarch hesitated, recalling the words of Nathrakin. He wondered what Sagitha beheld when she looked at him. What manner of creature did she see with that warp eye of hers?

'A good man,' she whispered, somehow in answer to his unspoken question. 'A good and loyal servant of the Emperor. Nothing more, nothing less.'

A tear trickled down the Navigator's scarred cheek as Corax placed the tip of a claw beneath her ravaged chin.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

THE SHADOWMASTERS

The darkness was comforting.

Flames raging across the various districts of Atlas illuminated the heavens, but the streets between her towering tenements and looming manufactories were more shadow than firelight. Chamell had been born in the twilight of Lycaeus's prison-mines; grown to adolescence in the fitful dimness of lumen strips, he had spent his childhood in the darkened cells and corridors. As one of Corax's tunnel-runners, he had learned to navigate the narrow access shafts and maintenance ducts by sound and smell alone.

The darkness was home.

When Deliverance had been created, he had thought that the darkness had been dispelled forever. With the coming of the Emperor, with the arrival of Enlightenment, Chamell had been proud to stand alongside his fellow freedom fighters in that glorious radiance.

Now he fought in the darkness again, so that the traitors would not extinguish the light he had never seen as a child. Horus's treachery threatened to bring tyranny and devastation back to those that had been saved from the terrors of Old Night.

With Chamell were three others – Fasur, Senderwat and Korin. All were Lycaeus-born, and all were peculiarly *gifted*. Chamell was nominally ranked as sergeant and the others as battle-brothers, but there was another name for the four Raven Guard warriors flitting from one pool of gloom to another.

Mor Deythan. The Shadowmasters.

Be where the enemy desires you not to be. So proclaimed the First Axiom of Victory. The Mor Deythan excelled at this.

Chamell and his fighters used their abilities to remain unseen. They drifted past the outlying pickets of the skitarii, passing so close at times that they could, if needed, strike down their foes in an instant. Such action was unnecessary; the sentries and patrols detected nothing. Their attention was focused elsewhere. Other Raven Guard and the Mechanicum forces allied to Lord Corax made their presence well known to the renegade tech-priests, drawing attention away from the danger that lurked close at hand.

The Shadowmasters passed through the enemy lines. They moved from one patch of darkness to another, almost to within firing distance of the great Mechanicum temple at the heart of the floating city. Already they had infiltrated the refinery pipeline feeding the edifice and placed their timed charges. Now they waited in the darkness for the detonations that would herald the next phase of the attack.

Chamell had been so proud to be chosen as a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. Hand-picked by the primarch himself, from amongst the thousands that had aided in the overthrow of the despots of Kiavhar, he had trained with the others, his body changed beyond recognition by the implants and therapies bestowed by the Apothecaries of the Raven Guard.

And then, upon the eve of his ascension to full battle-brother, they had come for him. Just as the Librarians had occasionally taken away one of the initiates who had developed latent psychic ability, so the Mor Deythan had claimed Chamell. They saw in him what others could not; they saw the secret gift of the primarch. The shadow-walk.

The charges blew, sending a fireball high into the skies above Atlas, and Chamell and his brothers moved again, their black armour blending perfectly with the umbra. They were nothing more than shadows themselves.

A directed electromagnetic pulse from Korin's modified gauntlet overloaded the arc-light pylon at the end of the street, plunging the road into blackness. Moving quickly, the four of them planted handfuls of small but potent plasma mines, like farmers sowing a deadly crop – there was detritus and rubble aplenty to conceal the charges.

In the distance, blaring klaxons shattered the silence. They were followed by the growl of engines and the thud of heavy armoured feet on rockcrete. A few hundred metres away, more enemy warriors swarmed from the temple to seek out the perpetrators of the pipeline attack.

It was not long before the column approached Chamell's position. He glanced up and saw familiar, dark shapes moving across the roofs of the buildings, bounding from one to the next in near-silence.

He whispered a few syllables in stalk-argot, readying the squad for combat. Fasur and Korin prepared their stripped-down plasma rifles. They packed the full punch of an unmodified weapon, but sacrificed charge time for lightweight design; enough to deter an armoured foe but not designed for prolonged combat. Chamell's and Senderwat's missile launchers were of equally slimline construction. Lack of ammunition was no great disadvantage – it was not in the minds of the Mor Deythan to engage at length.

Half-tracked transports and armoured walkers growled and stomped past the Shadowmasters' position. Chamell drew upon the specialised training he had received all those years ago; he remained motionless, becoming one with the shadows. Gunners in cupolas looked straight through him as they passed, seeing nothing, swinging their weapons to cover other directions.

It was quirk of the gene-seed, the Apothecaries had explained. In every generation of Lycaeus-born Raven Guard, there were a handful that carried more than just the standard genetic code of the XIX Legion. This explanation had never quite sat right with Chamell or the other Shadowmasters – surely a mind as brilliant as Corax's would be able to find the tiny mutation, the quirk that set the gifted apart, and isolate it for future exploitation?

Between themselves, they had their own whispered theories. A splinter of Corax's soul within them, perhaps? Even though no one tended to speak in terms of 'souls' anymore, the fact that the primarch was capable of removing himself entirely from the perception of others was an open secret amongst the Raven Guard. So too was the existence of the Mor Deythan. No one spoke of either to outsiders.

Special reflex technology, they told everybody else. Miniaturised. Highly temperamental.

The truth was much simpler: darkness was their home, and in darkness the Shadowmasters could not be seen.

The great irony of their kind – an irony taught to them by Corax himself – was that in order to bring illumination to others, one needed to embrace the darkness. Not the darkness of the spirit; in his heart Chamell held true to the light, to the sun's warmth that he had never known as an infant.

No, this was a darkness made by others. To break the darkness, one had to engage it, become easy with it, and destroy it from within. This the Raven Guard knew well, and the Mor Deythan better than most. While the plaudits and glory went to those that marched to war surrounded by the pageantry of the Legion, the Shadowmasters sneaked and slinked. In victory they made the light a little brighter, and that was reward enough.

Much like today. While Atlas burned, in the smoke and grime the Shadowmasters patiently waited for the right moment to strike.

When several of the half-tracks and walkers had passed, Chamell sent the trigger signal. Plasma erupted along the street, engulfing the lead elements of the column, cracking open ceramic plates and searing through metal and flesh. Half a kilometre away, Agapito launched his attack, his warriors descending upon the enemy with furious bolter fire and a storm of grenades.

Still the Shadowmasters waited while the traitor skitarii tried to reorganise, utterly unaware of the unseen foe in their midst. Chamell watched as Agapito's warriors moved along the column from the rear. They took out each of the walkers in turn, methodically butchering and smashing everything in their way.

The enemy responded, sending out reinforcements from the temple to aid their stricken comrades. Agapito and his warriors began to withdraw, and the time to act had come.

Opening fire with plasma and missiles, the Mor Deythan struck from behind, tearing through the newly arrived skitarii. Caught between the escaping Raven Guard and the new enemy in their midst, the tech-priests' warriors were cut down by the dozen. Multi-turreted walkers and transports exploded, and rockets sent bursts of shrapnel through the ranks of infantry.

As suddenly as they had attacked, the Shadowmasters ceased.

Burning wreckage and bodies littered the street. The fires were spreading, chasing away the darkness, and the enemy were gathering their numbers. It was time to enact the First Axiom of Stealth: Be other than where the enemy believes you to be.

Falling back, Chamell and his companions sought out the shadows, slipping away into their dark embrace once more.

RAVENLORD

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

Vengeance Forces

CORVUS CORAX, Primarch of the XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'
GHERITH ARENDI, Former commander of the Shadow Wardens

SOUKHOUNOU, Commander of the Hawks
ALONI TEV, Commander of the Falcons
AGAPITO NEV, Commander of the Talons
BRANNE NEV, Commander of the Raptors

NAVAR HEF, Lieutenant, Raptors
DEVOR, Raptor
NEROKA, Raptor

SHAAK, Lieutenant, Falcons
BALSAR KURTHURI, Restored Librarian

CHAMELL, Shade-sergeant, Mor Deythan
SENDERWAT, Mor Deythan
FASUR, Mor Deythan
KORIN, Mor Deythan
STRANG, Mor Deythan

ARCATUS VINDIX CENTURIO, Legio Custodes
ANNOVULDI, Warsmith, IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'
NORIZ, Captain, VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'
KASATI NUON, VIII Legion 'Night Lords'
KASDAR, X Legion 'Iron Hands'
DAMASTOR KYIL, X Legion 'Iron Hands'

NASTURI EPHRENIA, Strategium controller of the battle-barge *Avenger*
NAIMA STAROTHRENDAR, Baroness of Scarato

On Carandiru

NATHIAN, Planetary commandant

NAPENNA, Techmarine, XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'
IAENTO, IX Legion 'Blood Angels'

FAJALLO, Carandiru cell leader

PROLOGUE

Carandiru
[Day of Vengeance – DV]

'You think one legionary can take back a world?'

A burst of bolter fire accompanied the question from the Emperor's Children warrior, ripping through the plas-board wall that separated the main floor of the auditorium from the holo-projection chamber.

Soukhounou kept perfectly still, crouched behind the bulk of the projector itself.

'You chose the wrong allegiance,' the traitor continued.

The Raven Guard commander listened to the tread of boots ascending bare stone steps between the rows of chairs. He tensed as they came closer. Servos wheezed as the renegade stopped just outside the door. Another burst of fire shredded a row of metal cabinets just to Soukhounou's right. He edged to the left, moving around the projector plinth.

'You cannot turn back the tide.'

Soukhounou was not listening to the words. As the traitor finished speaking, the Raven Guard heard the distinctive click of a magazine being ejected.

He was up and out of his hiding place in an instant, sprinting towards the wall. His pistol spat a hail of bolts, adding to the fist-sized holes already breaking the plas-board. Hitting the separating wall at full speed, he crashed through, slamming into the side of the purple-clad traitor legionary.

The Raven Guard's impetus sent them both toppling, spinning and crashing back down the steps of the auditorium. Reaching the main floor both warriors rolled to their feet, still locked together. Soukhounou had the advantage, the fibre bundles in his armour churning with power as he drove the renegade backwards, sending both of them crashing out through high glass doors onto a broad balcony. The two Space Marines thudded against the balustrade, looking down at the square. A black banner emblazoned with the Eye of Horus hung below.

The plaza seethed with people – ordinary men and women surging across the cobbles, seemingly oblivious to the bolter and heavy weapons fire from the citadel garrison. Sporadic las-fire flashed up from the crowd but it was their numbers that were their greatest weapon. Thousands, maybe tens of thousands, thronged the streets, converging on the traitor enclave. Beyond, darkness was spreading across the city, block after block engulfed in creeping shadow.

'Not just one legionary,' snarled Soukhounou. He freed his left hand, fist glowing as a powered blade slid from the back of his gauntlet. 'A symbol. A message.'

He slammed the punch-dagger up into the throat of the traitor. The crowd below roared as Soukhounou tossed the corpse of the Emperor's Children legionary over the balcony. He lifted his hand in salute. The liberation of Carandiru had begun.

Seven more legionaries blocked Corax's path. Five were clad in warplate painted in the livery of the Emperor's Children; another sported deep red armour marked by the sigils of the Word Bearers; the last wore the colours of the Sons of Horus. Corax wondered what slight or crime the legionaries had committed to have been allocated such onerous duty. No warrior of the Legiones Astartes would volunteer to garrison a prison world when there was glory in battle to be won elsewhere. They did not look injured or otherwise infirm, which might have explained the need for a non-battlefield role.

It was a mystery the primarch was prepared to live with. His anger was up and he was in no mood for taking prisoners.

Three of the Emperor's Children opened fire with their bolters, sparking rounds from Corax's armour as he advanced into the vestibule outside the central strategium. The other two had pistols and chainswords at the ready but made no move to meet the primarch. The legionary from the Sons of Horus drew paired diamond-edged blades, but he also stayed back. The Word Bearer, helmetless, grinned fangs as he raised a plasma gun.

Corax jumped as the legionary opened fire, the blast of plasma screaming beneath the primarch as he twisted on black wings. Jump pack flaring, he covered the intervening distance in a moment, the fingers of his left hand outstretched. His gauntleted fist punched through the traitor's chest as Corax landed, ripping through ceramite and carving open fused bone. A bolt-round snapped from the side of his helmet, and more detonated across his back and shoulder; he turned to the others, and with a flick of the wrist he threw the dead Word Bearer into one of the Emperor's Children, knocking the Space Marine to the ground.

A wingtip lashed out, slicing through the blades of the Sons of Horus legionary and decapitating him. Spinning with the attack, Corax smashed the heel of his boot into the head of the downed warrior of the III Legion, crushing helm and skull into the floor.

The remaining Emperor's Children turned and ran, sprinting towards the open doorway behind them. The primarch lifted his right hand and his combi-weapon spat fire, sending a flurry of bolts after the fleeing Space Marines. Detonations sparked from armour and one of the renegades went down, head turned to bony shrapnel that embedded into the ceramite of his companions. The others reached a bulkhead, the last of them slowing to stretch a hand towards a keypad on the wall. A shaped charge from the other barrel of Corax's combi-weapon smashed into the renegade's back, splitting armour in an instant before ejecting its melta core through his spine.

The last two survivors fled down the corridor, not looking back. Corax dashed after them, long strides assisted by half-opened wings so that he seemed to glide between every step. Reaching his prey, he drove his armoured hands through their backpacks, shattering vertebrae, and lifted them both from the ground. Their panicked flailing caused him no difficulty.

Another door opened to his left as he tossed their twitching bodies aside. He turned to see several Raven Guard, weapons at the ready, with Arendi at their head.

'Follow me,' said the primarch. He turned his back on the new arrivals to head down the corridor towards the main chamber of the keep.

'Press on! Fight harder! The primarch's life depends on it!'

Branne's bellow rang out over the din of gunfire as he fired his combi-bolter in a long burst, mowing down a handful of the turncoat prison guards. Men and women in scarlet and black uniforms pitched to the

floor, bodies rent by bolt detonations. Lifting his power sword, he waved the others forward.

Around the Raven Guard commander, his Raptors stormed along the ramp leading up to the central courtyard. Some were clean-limbed, wearing the distinctively snouted helms of Mark VI armour. They laid down a curtain of fire with bolters and heavy weapons, pinning back the crush of humanity standing between them and the huge exit gates.

Around them, the *other* Raptors boiled forwards.

These were the warriors suffering gene-seed mutation. Some could still wear armour, or pieces of it; others were dressed in padded coveralls furnished with dense mesh and artisan-fashioned plate. The Techmarines had done their best to provide their twisted battle-brothers with the same protection as those free from the gene-taint. Bestial roars and screeches took the place of proud battlecries as they lumbered, skittered and ran towards the enemy. Many carried weapons – bolt pistols, power axes, chainswords – but some sported claws and bony protrusions that served just as well.

Between them, the two Raptor-kin cleaved into hundreds of renegade soldiers that had poured down into the lower cells to stem the jailbreak, little knowing they faced a battle-group of Legiones Astartes. Some tried to retreat, blocking the entry of others, while bolts, las-blasts and bullets whined, cracked and zipped through the close confines of the subterranean complex.

Branne glanced at the chronometer in his helm display. Lord Corax would be making his final move for the commandant's keep. The dampening field of the cell block, powered by a sub-generator to prevent teleportation and communications, was still blocking all signals.

The Raven Guard commander had to get to the surface, still an agonising three hundred metres away.

He had to warn his primarch about the traitor.

ONE

The battle-barge *Avenger*
[DV -128 days, Terran adjusted standard]

Corax summoned his commanders to him, with Arcatus of the Legio Custodes and Captain Noriz of the Imperial Fists, so that all factions of his force were represented. They had come from afar, brought together by the call of the Raven Guard primarch.

Scattered across dozens of systems, the Raven Guard had been waging their guerrilla war against the forces of Horus and the other traitors. Reinforcements ambushed en route to the battlefields creeping closer to Terra; supplies intercepted and taken by the Raven Guard, turned on those that sought to benefit from the shipments of arms and armour coming out of traitor-held forge worlds; scouting fleets destroyed.

In the years since Corax had made the *Avenger* his flagship much had changed. Once Commander Branne's chambers, now the rooms of the primarch had been extended, refitted and turned into a sub-strategium. The main room was still plainly decorated, plasteel walls a muted blue. A carved relief of the Raven Guard's device – a heraldic bird with wings and claws stretched, surrounded by a coiled chain – marked the wooden boards of the floor. The table that had once stood upon the symbol was now relegated to a side chamber, for when aboard ship Corax preferred to conduct his councils and briefings standing, to give urgency and movement to the thoughts of his commanders.

Around the walls were the blank screens of monitoring and communications stations, keyboards and runepads neatly stowed, stools tucked under the counters. For the past several days the primarch had waited here listening to the incoming reports from returning ships and flotillas, but all ancillary staff had been dismissed. He wanted his subordinates and the others to speak their minds freely without fear of showing dissent or hesitation in front of lesser ranks.

Corax waited for the last attendee to settle himself – Noriz, in his ochre battleplate. As Corax's gaze fell upon him the captain stood sharply to attention, his crested helm under one arm. He had recently arrived from Deliverance, where his Legion's particular skills had been put to good use; the home-moon of the Raven Guard and the forge world it orbited would be far more secure after a year of defensive improvements by the Imperial Fists. He was the youngest, head sporting a crop of blond curls, bright blue eyes that never rested.

At the opposite end of the scale, the eldest was Aloni, with Asiatic complexion and a naturally bald scalp riveted with many gilded service studs. The leader of the assault companies of the Falcons, his armour showed the most recent repairs and maintenance, sporting fresh-bonded rivets and plates yet to be

adorned with the ceremonial black paint. Despite his ragtag appearance, his wargear was in good order, metal oiled and gleaming, pouches and mag-packs on thighs and greaves filled with ammunition and grenades.

Agapito and Aloni stood to Noriz's right, Branne and Souk-hounou to the left, all clad in the midnight hue of the Raven Guard. As brothers, Branne and Agapito were not quite identical, but both had square jaws, heavy brows and flat cheeks. There was a sallow cast to their skin from being born and raised under the artificial lights of Lycaeus, which even the augmentations of the Legiones Astartes could not remove. Agapito was marked out by a weathered scar on his face.

Soukhounou was the darkest of them all, a testament to his gene-heritage amongst the Sahelian League on Terra. He had short-cropped, curled black hair and a beard of the same furred his chin and cheeks; he had arrived only the day before and was yet to shave off the growth of the last patrol. His dark flesh was cut by pale scars and tribal tattoos from his childhood, where he had been raised as a praise-singer before being taken by the Emperor's newly raised Legions.

All were large men, boosted by their Space Marine genes, but they were slightly shorter than Arcatus, who was not only physically larger – though not as big as Corax – but held himself straight, with easy poise and grace. A thin face, sharp nose and swept-back blond hair had earnt him a nickname amongst the Raven Guard: the Emperor's Eagle.

Corax nodded a greeting to each of them and then started to speak, eyes moving from one to the other and back, gauging their reactions without accusation.

'We have fought hard since the disaster at Ravendelve curtailed any hope that we might return the Legion to some semblance of its former strength. In the way only the Raven Guard know best we have struck at Horus time and again, sapping his strength, drawing his ire away from other forces.' Corax sighed. 'It is not enough. The Warmaster's armies and fleets still constrict like a noose upon Terra.'

'Are you suggesting we return to the Throneworld?' said Noriz, with hope in his voice. 'Are we going to join the defence?'

'I would rather lay down my life amongst the stars than cower behind a wall,' said Agapito.

'Cower?' Noriz bridled at the comment. 'You think Lord Dorn a coward?'

'Your pardon, I did not mean any such thing,' said Agapito, raising a hand in apology. He looked at the primarch. 'We fought to be free of imprisonment, my lord. To incarcerate ourselves within walls once more would make a mockery of everything we believe.'

'What more can we do?' asked Soukhounou. 'We only have so many men, so many ships. As skilled as we are in such conditions, we cannot conjure warriors from nothing.'

'From nothing?' Corax shook his head, eyes closed. 'I tried that, and it has caused us great pain.'

His mind was swept back to the events at Ravendelve some years earlier.

Fear and desperation. Not in the eyes of the men he had turned into beasts, but hiding in his own heart. Having faced death twice, almost succumbing to the despair, it had been a different sort of fear that had propelled him into such recklessness – the fear of being wrong.

Hundreds of Deliverance's brightest had paid the price of Corax's desperation and were paying it still. Every passing month took more of a toll on their mutated physiques and he had to watch them being slowly crippled by the blight he had loosed into their bodies. The war allowed no time for pity, no time to go back to his research to look for a cure; the data itself had been too dangerous to keep and what remained of the psychic knowledge implanted into his memory by the Master of Mankind had all but faded.

If he could win the war he could deliver up the broken Raptors to his gene-father for a cure. If there was any hope for them being returned to normal, it would be in the hands of the Emperor.

But the war had to be won first.

He opened his eyes.

'No, we do not seek to conjure warriors from nothing. There are other fighters to be found, though. We hear word of them, catching their transmissions – the messages of their astropaths. Remnants, companies, squads of Legions broken by war, distant expeditions now returning, garrisons half-forgotten since the crusade began, survivors of offensives and counter-attacks that have broken apart from the Imperium. They are scattered out here with us, fighting as best they can. I will bring them together and we will train them in our way of fighting. That is how we will grow strong again.'

'It would take forever to round up every waif and stray legionary, even just those within a few thousand light years,' said Arcatus.

'We will not go to them, they will come to us. A single, simple message to pierce the roiling warp storms. A clarion call for those without a leader to come together. We will issue the cry to muster and we will strike back with more ferocity than before. We will make Horus rue the day he underestimated us! If the Warmaster wants the galaxy to burn, we will see him consumed by its flames.'

'If loyalist factions hear this summoning, will not also our enemies?' Noriz said quietly.

'Undoubtedly,' said Corax. He shrugged away the captain's concerns and looked at Arcatus. 'If you intercepted an enemy message openly broadcast, calling forces to a particular place, what would you make of it?'

'I would suspect it to be a trap,' said the Custodian. 'It would seem like the perfect opportunity for an ambush.'

'But won't our allies think it also?' said Soukhounou. 'A rebel ruse to bring them to one place?'

'Perhaps, but lone ships, small flotillas have more chance of eluding such a trap than a massed fleet. And they will *want* to believe it is true, whereas our enemy will be guided by caution. When they begin to arrive we can have them send their own messages, so that by word of their own more will be brought to us.'

The Custodian looked unconvinced, and rubbed his chin in thought.

'By whose authority would you command these forces? You assume much if you think that warriors from many Legions will follow you. The last person to be granted such power was the Warmaster…'

'I need no greater authority than I was given by the Emperor on the day he made me commander of the Nineteenth Legion,' Corax replied. 'I am a primarch of the Legiones Astartes, and though that title has been sullied these past years, it still means something to me, and to others. I will restore the honour of that role and prove that loyalty remains a virtue in these dark times.'

'And where would we muster this army?' asked Arcatus.

Corax turned to the controls on the wall and activated a hololithic map, projected from lenses installed in the high ceiling. He manipulated the dials and pad until the view zoomed in to an isolated star system a few dozen light years away.

'Here,' said the primarch. 'A system we liberated only fifty days ago – Scarato.'

TWO

Scarato
[DV -91 days]

‘In the years of the Great Crusade the conclaves of Legions were magnificent affairs filled with celebration, ceremony and grandeur.’ Aloni was wistful, staring into the flames in the immense fireplace that illuminated the great hall. The fire glinted from the dozen golden service studs that pierced his brow and scalp. ‘This feels more like a council of thieves.’

The immense hall was used to far grander occasions, like those that Aloni now remembered. Nearly two hundred metres long and forty metres high, its huge vaulted ceiling was held aloft by pillars like the legs of Titans. The grand fireplace was large enough that a Rhino could have been driven into it, and the heat from the gas-fired blaze was easily felt although the Space Marine was several dozen metres away. Hidden in the chimney was a heat-reclamation system that powered the enormous chandeliers hanging like constellations above.

It was the only chamber in which his primarch felt comfortable, it seemed; the other rooms of the palaces were too small to contain his energy, the corridors too tight, even for one who had been raised in the cells of Lycaeus. Since his declaration and their arrival at Scarato he had been full of movement, barely able to hold in check the desire for action.

He sat in a custom-made throne behind a large desk that had been brought down from the stateroom of the *Avenger*. Combined with the gilded decor and bright frescoes of the hall it made for a grandiose office more suited to gala balls than councils of war.

‘Circumstances dictate,’ replied the primarch. ‘What is the latest tally?’

‘Three hundred and twelve legionaries,’ said Aloni, not needing to check the data-slate in his hands. ‘A small cargo lighter, retro-fitted with warp engines and Geller fields, just arrived with seven Iron Hands on board. They’d been holding out in the Aquinia system.’

‘I told Arcatus they would come if we called,’ said Corax. He leaned forward, pushing aside the piles of reports on the desk. He was about to speak, but looked away at the sound of the doors opening. Aloni turned his head to see Baroness Naima Starothrendar enter. Short, middle-aged, with a distinct limp and a freshly healing cut across her left cheek, she was physically underwhelming. But on Scarato it had been her refusal to give in to the Sons of Horus, her tenacity to keep alive some of the old ruling class and muster a resistance movement, which had paved the way for the rebellion instigated by Aloni’s secret insertion less than a hundred days earlier.

She approached the primarch, forcing Aloni to step aside so that she could stand by the desk; not for a moment had she doubted the Space Marine would give way. Her expression was stern, but when she spoke her words were soft.

'A few rebel elements – those that openly collaborated with the Sons of Horus – are still holding out in a few of their boltholes,' the de facto world ruler told them. 'I have set in motion legal procedure to set up tribunals but I fear the people are too hot-blooded and angry to wait for due process.'

'Understandable, but intolerable,' said Corax, equally quietly spoken. He regarded Naima for a few moments, rubbing his chin with a long finger. 'I sense you have a further proposal to stave off mob justice.'

'We need to issue a joint statement,' said Naima, folding her arms. 'A call from both of us together, asking for calm, should assuage the worst anguish. You are well-known as a liberator and a warrior of justice. If you add your word to mine, if you guarantee that those who turned on their own people will face punishment, the people of Scarato will believe us.'

'I cannot make such a promise,' said Corax. He shrugged. 'I have every faith that you will keep your word, but I will not be here to ensure adherence to Imperial law.'

'Some warriors will remain, surely?' Naima tensed, eyes flickering to Aloni. 'You must maintain some kind of presence here after the tumult you have unleashed. A dozen ships in as many days, and what of those that arrive after you have left? Or if the Sons of Horus return to reclaim what you have taken from them?'

'I have prised the grip of Horus from Scarato, but it is up to the people of your world to prevent it tightening again. We will leave a few ships that you can crew, but my legionaries will be needed elsewhere, freeing other planets and systems.'

Naima sagged, but Corax smiled and stood up, extending a hand to the woman. The primarch looked right at her, black eyes glinting in the light of the fire, skin like chalk.

'When the Sons of Horus came here before they were at the height of their power, in great numbers. It is my aim that they will not come back, and certainly not with such force, but to achieve this I must wage war in other places. If I remain, if I turn Scarato into a base for operations, you can be certain that the traitors *will* return – in numbers such as I cannot protect against.'

'Lord Corax, I know that you have matters far grander than the fate of Scarato to trouble your thoughts, but for us, for me, the safety of this world and its people is the extent of our concerns. You tell us that to support Horus would be bad for Scarato and I believe you, I really do. The Sons of Horus were not benevolent masters, we know that from recent experience.' Naima waved a hand towards the doors of the hall. 'But my people are afraid. Better, they might say, to have a bad master but live than resist and be slain.'

'You cannot concede to counsel of despair,' said Aloni, agitated by this attitude. 'Scarato has passed a handful of years under the yoke of a tyrant. Our world – Lycaeus, the world where I was raised – knew tyranny for countless generations. I was a child, born into a prison, judged guilty simply because I was conceived by a woman who had tried to organise a petition against an overseer who would not allow her to take rest breaks due to the pains of her pregnancy. I never knew that there could be a life other than imprisonment and toil, from my first memories until I was big enough to lift a las-pick. There were those whose only crimes were to have descended from ancestors seven, eight generations back that had displeased the despots of Kiavahr.'

The thought of it riled Aloni even after so long, his stare intent upon the Scaratoan leader. Fists formed at his sides as he grimaced at the recollection.

'If you capitulate to the threat of Horus it would be to condemn your people to share that fate,' Aloni

continued. ‘I know it is hard, but Lord Corax showed us that one does not have to simply accept the choice between slavery and death. Perhaps for ourselves we must offer up our lives, but such sacrifice can bring freedom to others.’

Naima was taken aback by the vehemence of Aloni’s argument. When he had arrived at Scarato he had found a resistance movement thriving, building for an appointed rebellion. There had been no need for rhetoric and argument; all that had been required was the assurance that if the resistance moved, the Raven Guard would answer. His presence alone had sparked hope. Naima looked at the commander for some time, a slight frown creasing the tanned skin of her forehead. He wondered if she was troubled by his words, or was trying to work out if he was simple. She scratched at an earlobe, a sign of deep thought that Aloni had noticed before.

‘There are no guarantees,’ said Corax, sitting down, hands clasping the arms of his throne. His expression hardened. ‘Only choices.’

‘I understand,’ Naima said slowly. She looked at Aloni and there was a hint of pity in her eyes.

The Space Marine chose to make no remark. He would never be a victim again, thanks to Corax and the Emperor.

Naima assumed a more upright stance and tugged at the hem of her jacket to straighten it. When she next spoke her tone was more businesslike. ‘Thank you for having faith in the people of Scarato, Lord Corax. I hope that you find everything to your satisfaction.’

‘Exemplary,’ said the primarch. ‘Your people’s hospitality is matched by their efficiency.’

‘I wonder if I could trouble you for one more piece of advice,’ Naima said. Corax nodded. ‘I am sure that there are those who will attempt to make a push for power when you have departed. Factions that have benefited from the occupation will seek to restore some of what they have lost. Like you, I have no desire for pogroms and persecution and I must be able to trust those I appoint to positions of power. How can you be sure of their motives? How can you lead them without trusting them?’

‘It was an issue I first encountered when I was planning the uprising on Lycaeus,’ said the primarch. ‘All endeavour is only as certain as the weakest will. There were prisoners that would have been all too willing to betray my cause in return for privileges from the guards. My people knew who they were for the most part, but as the movement grew I could not personally vet every fighter pledged to the cause.

‘During the preparations, I created task forces who knew little of each other, so that no single part of the movement could bring down the whole effort. However, this was not enough to guarantee our security. When the time came for open fighting, I reorganised the cells, swapping leaders and personnel between them, so that had any conspiracy arisen, it would then be broken apart. Momentum and action are the guard against corruption. When power is taken for granted idleness follows and after that… Well, none of us need any further lessons in the price of corruption.’

‘We will do the same with the warriors from other Legions that answer our call,’ added Aloni when Corax fell silent. ‘Existing formations are being broken up, commanders and sergeants moved from one to another. Former placements and allegiances are no longer relevant. If a group of traitors has arrived, masquerading their intent, then their ability to perform treachery is much impaired by being separated. In our experience it will not take long for each of the new formations to determine the true loyalties of those that make up their number.’

‘A root and branch reorganisation?’ said Naima. ‘I am not sure my fellow nobles will be so pleased to hear that.’

‘It is the only way to break power blocs and ensure mutual interest,’ said Corax. ‘You will have to give up your own position in time, in order that the people can see you are not invested in maintaining your own power indefinitely.’

‘Is that your intent, Lord Corax?’ asked Naima. ‘Would you be ready to hand over command of your Legion to another, to avoid similar accusations of self-aggrandisement?’

Aloni noticed her sharp look directed at the primarch. It was the first time the commander had heard any suggestion that his leader might contemplate stepping aside. Questions sprang to mind, dozens of them, but the Raven Guard kept his silence and waited for the primarch’s reply.

Corax did not answer for some time. When he did, he glanced at Aloni and then met Naima’s stare with his own.

‘Yes. I have always desired to stand aside for others in due course. There will come a time when my continued presence causes more harm than good. I had thought that moment approaching, but Horus made other plans. He most certainly was not ready to relinquish power.’

‘And you think that you are the best person to decide when that moment will come again?’ said Naima, doubt in her voice. Aloni wondered if the doubt was for herself or directed at Corax. ‘Are you so self-aware and strong-willed?’

‘I do not know.’ A crooked smile twisted the primarch’s lips. ‘If there comes a moment when I am utterly convinced I will know when the time is right, *that* will be when I must step aside.’

THREE

Scarato
[DV -90 days]

Listening to the transmission from the *Avenger*, Soukhounou's eyes widened with surprise. He had been expecting a quiet few hours on watch. The command chamber they had established adjoining the ancient palace of the planetary overlord was little more than a communications relay station, hooked into the sensors and vox-suites aboard the *Avenger* in orbit; the battle-barge's systems were more powerful than anything they had access to on the surface.

'Does the primarch know of this?' the commander replied over the comm system.

'*I informed him just before I sent you word, commander,*' said Controller Ephrenia. Her ageing face was stern on the flickering display. '*He informed me that as officer of the watch you would deal with the matter appropriately.*'

Soukhounou was not sure if that was praise or a test. 'And this signal originated from a scow breaking warp two days ago?'

'*As I reported, commander,*' Ephrenia said patiently. '*Crypto-detection matrices confirm that it is one of the old Legion ciphers.*'

This in itself meant nothing; the enemy would have had plenty of time to break an opposing Legion's security protocol. What confused Soukhounou was why anyone would think broadcasting an outdated Raven Guard code would forestall suspicion.

'Any other identifiers?' he asked.

'*Nothing else, but the ship is too far out for meaningful vox-traffic, commander,*' said the controller. '*Any message would still not arrive for several more hours.*'

'Despatch *Fearless* to investigate. The ship is to be treated as hostile until proven otherwise.'

'*I understand, commander. Full fleet security measures have been implemented.*' Ephrenia leaned closer to the vid-capture, her voice dropping to a whisper. '*Do you really think it could be more survivors from Isstvan? It seems unlikely.*'

'I don't know,' admitted Soukhounou. He shook his head. 'The sheer implausibility makes it a poor subterfuge. I cannot imagine what a force of traitors would think they could achieve with outdated transmissions and a half-crippled scow.'

'*My thoughts too, commander. The code is a personal signal for Gherith Arendi.*'

'Arendi?' Soukhounou had thought his surprise at the day's events could not have increased, but this

revelation sparked even more confusion. ‘He led the primarch’s guard. The Shadow Wardens.’

‘*I know, commander. Gherith was never more than arm’s reach from Lord Corax if possible. If anyone would fight their way across half the galaxy to rejoin the primarch it would be him.*’

‘That was before Isstvan. A lot has changed since then.’

Corax’s command had almost been a roar, ordering the Shadow Wardens away. Aloni watched from the back of his jetbike as Arendi flinched from his master. Corax left them then, his flight pack taking him into the blood-red clouds above the Urgall Depression, seeking the traitor Lorgar, whose warriors were cleaving into the Raven Guard flank, attacking, getting pushed back and then attacking again with brutal purpose, like a warped blade repeatedly hacking into flesh.

Arendi had tried to follow Corax, leading his men forward with bounds of their jump packs, but the Ravenlord’s wings swept him out of reach and the twisted monsters of the Word Bearers intervened.

Aloni was too occupied with the breakout to keep track of the Shadow Wardens. He was needed elsewhere and only returned with his squadron nearly twenty minutes later, having cut a breach through the Iron Warriors cannons and tanks up on the ridge. Of the three hundred Raven Guard Aloni had led up the hill, twenty-two remained.

The Shadow Wardens had fared even worse.

The fighting moved on, leaving piles of dismembered and wounded legionaries in its wake.

Aloni looked at the carnage and knew, logically, that some of the warriors lying there in mangled warplate might still be alive. In his heart he did not believe it was true. Lieutenant Carakon was requesting urgent reinforcements at the lead-point of the sector four breakout; Corax was withdrawing in a Thunderhawk, and it was up to every company and squad to see to their own exit.

Others would have died if Aloni had tarried. He had given the dead not a second glance as he angled his jetbike away and soared back up the ridge.

‘Could he really still be alive after all of this time?’ asked Ephrenia.

‘Possibly. But after what happened at Ravendelve I do not think it wise to accept anything as it first appears. I am glad it will be Lord Corax and not I that must try to see the truth of it.’

FOUR

Scarato
[DV -81 days]

‘Are you sure it is really Gherith?’

Corax looked at the Space Marine on the flickering vid-screen, trying to decide for himself. The new arrival certainly looked like the warrior who had been appointed by Corax to the command of his ceremonial guard. Not only his face, but his build, the way he carried himself, were the same as those etched into the primarch’s memory. He didn’t need the voice-match analysis for confirmation either; his superhuman hearing was as accurate as any machine.

Arendi – or the man claiming to be him – was alone in the room, sitting on a bare bench, arms folded. Now and then he would glance up at the vid-transmitter with a sour look. He wore a thick sarong-like belt of coarse material, having been divested of his armour on arrival. That plate was undergoing examination by the armoury, who looked for any kind of transmitting or tracking devices that might lead them to Arendi’s true masters. Corax had given it a cursory look, impressed by the modifications and field repairs that had kept it functioning; Arendi’s time in the machine shops of the Lycaeus prison had left an aptitude for such things, though his calling had not taken him to the ranks of the Techmarines.

The former commander of the Shadow Wardens was Lycaeus-bred, his muscled body leaner than many legionaries, cheeks and eye sockets hollow. He had always been as such, but the years following the Dropsite Massacre had not been kind; bolt scars pocked his massive frame, blade cuts marked his back and shoulders and from his left hip to right pectoral was the swirl of a plasma splash. In places, the flesh had been burned so deeply that it revealed the dark shadow of his black carapace beneath puckered flesh. Such wounds meant nothing, as easily inflicted by weapons carried by loyalists as traitors.

There was one mark, however, that Corax could decipher easily. It was three lacerations from left ear to shoulder. Someone that had not been fighting in the Urgall Depression might have thought the wound caused by an animal attack, but the primarch knew better.

Some maniacal traitor beast had tried to rip out Arendi’s throat.

And all of the evidence meant nothing since the incident at Ravendelve, when Alpha Legion infiltrators wearing false faces and faked battleplate had been uncovered amongst the Raven Guard ranks.

‘Gene-testing will take several more hours, Lord Corax,’ said Soukhounou, who had been placed in charge of the new arrivals simply by dint of being on watch when they had first arrived. ‘I have sent for the Librarian, Balsar Kurthuri.’

Soukhounou turned his back on the display to face Corax, troubled.

'He has been asking for you constantly, lord. Over and over. The others keep telling us that you must speak with Arendi too.'

'Sounds suspicious,' said Corax. He peered at the small screen. 'Why would they not pass any information to you?'

'That's what I thought as well, lord. I asked Arendi that question myself.' The commander glanced at the monochrome image. 'He claims he has news of an important target, in some system called Carandiru. He said he needed to speak to you first, before word spreads to the others. I don't know what he means by that.'

'I cannot see how he poses any physical threat to me, so if he is a traitor I think we can assume it is not an assassination attempt.' Corax scratched his chin in thought. 'Very well. I will talk to him.'

The former bodyguard was in a chamber nearby. Corax glanced at Soukhounou, who had followed him to the entrance. The Raven Guard met the look with a grim expression, and opened the door.

Arendi jumped to his feet, fist to his chest as Corax ducked through. The sound of the latch rang loudly as the door closed behind the primarch. The room seemed suddenly small, filled with Corax's presence.

'My lord!' Arendi's eyes glittered with moisture. 'It is good to see you alive!'

Corax did not return the sentiment. He glared at the Space Marine, fingers knotted behind his back.

'Why are you here?' the primarch demanded.

'We received the call, my lord,' Arendi said, confused. He looked around the room. It was not a purpose-built cell, but had been cleared of all furnishings except for the bench. 'In truth, I did not expect to be made a prisoner again.'

'Trust is a scarce resource in this age,' the primarch replied, regretting the truth of the statement. 'Not all are as they appear to be.'

'A truth I know well, my lord.' Arendi relaxed a little, hands falling to his sides. He grinned suddenly. 'Really, it is such a relief to see that you are alive and well. We thought… Well, with the Gorgon and the Lord of Drakes dead… It was anarchy, but we always hoped that you had gotten away. If anyone could, we said, it would be the Ravenlord.'

'We will have time to reminisce later. What is it that you say only I can hear?'

'Apologies, Lord Corax, but it is a matter that might spread discontent should it fall upon the wrong ears,' said Arendi. He started to gesticulate as he spoke, reminding Corax of his old expressiveness. 'There is *another* prison, my lord. A whole world, it is said, where the rebels have incarcerated millions. Some legionaries amongst them, but many Imperial Army and most of them civilians. Bad stories, my lord. Very bad.'

The thought caused Corax some consternation, and memories of Lycaeus were quick to surface. The primarch pushed them aside to concentrate on the present matter. 'Why would such news be so dangerous?' he muttered. 'It is no surprise. The traitors have been enslaving whole worlds across the galaxy.'

Corax growled as he dwelt on the notion, bringing his gauntlets up to form fists. Arendi held up a hand, as though he thought the primarch might attack him.

'It is only rumour, my lord,' warned the legionary. 'A tale passed from one to another along an uncertain chain. It might even be a trap, intended to ensnare you.'

'Now I understand your reluctance,' said Corax. Some of his commanders, and the lower ranks too, might jump at any chance to exonerate themselves, regardless of the consequences. Yet Arendi was quick to point out the flaws in his own story. 'You were right to remain silent until now. The Carandiru system is

some distance away. It would be no small endeavour to investigate these rumours.'

'Yes, several thousand light years, lord. Perhaps it is of no consequence. We came to serve, whatever your orders. We had hoped… That is, when the nights were long and the weather at its most bleak, we had believed nonetheless that the Legion had survived. It was difficult.' Arendi's voice trailed away and he looked earnestly at the primarch. 'We heard other rumours. Wild stories. Legions destroyed, primarchs slain. Those that hunted us, when we caught them, taunted us with tales of the Raven Guard's destruction. It was hard not to believe, but we held true. We knew they were lying.'

'Not quite,' Corax said with a sigh. 'We are not the force that existed before Isstvan. Less than four thousand of the old Legion remain.'

Arendi stared at the primarch, brow knotting, his expression pained. 'I suppose it was too much to hope. We should have known. It was hard enough for us to escape. Why did we expect it would be any different for the rest of the Legion?'

'How exactly did you leave Isstvan?' Corax asked quietly, his dark gaze intent on the Space Marine.

'Luck as much as judgement,' confessed Arendi. 'The traitors were so intent on killing they did not inspect the dead for some time. I survived until the night came and then slipped away. I knew it was too risky to broadcast on the usual Legion frequencies, but there were others who escaped, alone and in small groups. Not just Raven Guard but Iron Hands and Salamanders too. The renegades tried to hunt us down, and a few fell or gave up, but we kept on the move. Eventually we stumbled across the cargo lighters of a transport dropping supplies to one of the watchposts. We managed to take the lifter and then seized the ship in orbit.'

Arendi scratched at his brow, skin flaking away. Corax looked at the legionary properly and could see the fatigue in his eyes. Nutrient- and sleep-deprived, his skin was dry and mottled like a pale lizard, eyes bloodshot and dark-rimmed.

'How long ago?'

Arendi shrugged.

'Hard to say for sure. We were on Isstvan for six hundred and thirty days, give or take a few. After that, the rapid warp jumps made chronology difficult to fix. We've been bouncing from system to system just looking for allies or enemies, trying to do what we could to hurt the traitors.'

'Six hundred and thirty days?' It was Corax's turn to be shocked, but as his surprise subsided a small measure of pride swelled up within him. 'A remarkable achievement. What of the others, the Salamanders and Iron Hands?'

Arendi looked away suddenly and clasped his hands together, fingers knotting and fidgeting.

'Captured, or dead, most likely.'

Corax looked at Arendi for some time, trying to reach several conclusions. He was almost certain that this was the veteran of Lycaeus that had ascended the ranks of the Raven Guard to become one of the primarch's most trusted commanders. Everything about Arendi was authentic, from the way he talked to his scent and mannerisms. The story seemed not only plausible but unfortunate, and there was genuine hurt in the Space Marine's eyes; hurt Corax had seen a thousand times over in the gazes of those that had departed Isstvan with him, thinking on the brothers that had been left behind.

'It was my decision not to return to Isstvan,' the primarch said quietly.

It was the first time that he had made such a confession out loud, though similar thoughts had been voiced by others; not out of accusation but lament.

He met the legionary's anguished look. 'I knew there would be other survivors, but there was a greater threat. Stopping Horus was more important.'

Arendi's gaze hardened and his jaw tightened, but the Space Marine nodded.

‘Of course, my lord. I understand. It probably wasn’t the easiest decision.’

‘It was,’ Corax said firmly. ‘One of the simplest I have ever taken. I have never thought of any warrior as expendable – and I still do not – but I have never regretted or doubted my decision. The scales were tipped so far that there was no other choice.’

Taking in a deep breath, Arendi straightened and stood to attention.

‘And what of the prisoners at Carandiru?’

‘Do you think we should rescue them?’ Corax asked, stepping towards the door.

‘Aye, my lord, I do.’

Corax directed an inquisitive look at the legionary, so Arendi offered explanation.

‘You taught us that war is not won simply by force of arms. Some foes must be utterly annihilated, but many can be defeated in their minds long before they are broken militarily.’

‘And what bearing does that have on this mission?’

‘The converse, my lord. Even if a mission is not obviously of military benefit, it has value. If we are willing to let millions suffer torment and degradation for who can say how many years, I am not all that sure we deserve to win this war.’

It was a remarkable statement, made all the more stunning for the bluntness of its delivery. Corax had not heard the like from his warriors, and for a moment he considered admonishing Arendi for such seditious talk.

The primarch stopped himself, thinking about the traumas that Arendi must have undergone. It was no excuse for poor behaviour, but it gave the former commander an almost unique perspective. If anyone knew about the value of hope, sometimes blind hope, then it would be those men and women like Arendi who had striven in the face of hopelessness and utter defeat.

Corax laid a hand on the legionary’s shoulder, bending low to be eye to eye with him.

‘There is much to be done, so I do not promise that we will liberate Carandiru. I will, however, take heed of what you have said and bring all thought to bear on the matter.’

Arendi nodded in thanks and Corax moved away. As he reached the door, he glanced back.

‘I want to believe you, Gherith.’

‘I know,’ said the Space Marine. ‘That is why you can’t.’

‘A day, maybe less, and you will be reunited with the rest of the Legion. We are not so numerous that we need another commander, but your insight into the traitors’ workings will be much valued.’

Arendi said nothing and Corax felt his eyes on him as he left. Soukhounou was outside, obviously agitated and out of patience.

‘Is it him?’ asked the commander. ‘Can he be trusted?’

Corax did not reply immediately. It was not a simple question to answer. He thought about everything that had happened in the last few years – the treachery of Horus and others of his brothers, the Alpha Legion and their machinations, the schism of the Mechanicum – and he knew that though his instinct told him that the man in the chamber was Gherith Arendi, and that he was still loyal to the Raven Guard, such instinct and judgement could not be considered infallible.

‘Not yet,’ he said eventually, gesturing for Soukhounou to accompany him back up the corridor to the monitoring chamber. ‘But I *feel* he will prove true.’

‘Looks likely that we’ll know soon enough,’ said Soukhounou, as they entered the monitoring station and found Brother-Librarian Kurthuri waiting for them.

The psyker greeted the primarch with a nod and a salute, shoulders hanging heavily, his eyes weary. He had seen much employment in the past few days, probing into the minds of each new group of arrivals.

‘How goes it?’ asked Soukhounou while Corax bent to the vid-screen and watched Arendi.

'The others are who they say they are, and they believe that the warrior who led them off Isstvan is Gherith Arendi.' The Librarian glanced at the monitor, brow creasing. 'There is something they are holding back, though – a secret they are reticent to share.'

'Could you delve deeper and find it out?' asked Corax, not looking up.

'No, my lord, not without some preparation and even then with some risk to the subject and myself. I am not as gifted as some among the Librarius were – breaking the subconscious of a legionary requires a great deal of my willpower.'

'Very well,' said Corax, thinking on what Arendi had told him of the prison world. 'I think I already know this secret. If you are able, I would appreciate it if you could test the identity of Arendi right away. I know that you must be exhausted but he is the last for now.'

'Of course, my lord.' Kurthuri drew in a deep breath and wiped a hand across his waxen face. With a nod to Soukhounou he left the room.

Corax adjusted the view-screen display, turning on the audio feed. They heard Kurthuri approaching and then the clank of the lock and the quiet creak of the opening door.

'*I know you*,' said Arendi, eyes narrowed as he stood up and looked at Kurthuri. '*What are you doing here?*'

'*I am here to make sure you are what you say you are, brother,*' Kurthuri said gently. '*This should not take long and will not hurt if you do not offer resistance*.'

'*You were in the Librarius! If you think you're going to sink your teeth into my mind, you're badly mistaken*.'

Corax pressed a stud on the monitor controls, activating the speaker inside the other room.

'Arendi, this is Lord Corax. Brother-Librarian Kurthuri is there following *my* orders. You will comply with every instruction he gives you.'

'*A psyker?*' Arendi looked appalled. More than that, he looked fearful. '*I would rather not, my lord. Do you know what these psykers are capable of?*'

'They can tell me the truth,' Corax said sharply. 'I have had enough of your objections. If you refuse to submit to examination I will have you locked in the deepest cell on the planet.'

'*They… They hunted us with these witch-bastards, my lord! They taunted us with visions of what they had done, at the massacre, to the prisoners they took, tried to bait us out of hiding. We had to think of nothing, emptying our minds to stop them picking up the slightest echo. They turned us into mindless prey, my lord! They enjoyed it!*'

Corax grimaced, but he could not relent.

'We have a rule now, Gherith. All of those that come in must undergo psychic examination. One rule for all.'

Arendi hung his head, hands twitching. When he raised his eyes he stared at Kurthuri with surprising intensity.

'*All right, do it!*'

'*Relax, brother.*' Kurthuri gestured for Arendi to sit down. The Librarian followed him to the bench and sat next to him. '*This will be easier if there is physical contact,*' he said, his voice quiet and calm. He reached out a hand. '*Do you mind?*'

Arendi shook his head after a moment and they clasped each other's arms, wrist to wrist. Kurthuri closed his eyes but Arendi's were wide open, staring at the psyker.

There were no pyrotechnics, no moans or drama. Corax watched the display without wavering, even as Arendi started to tremble. He could see the legionary's eyes beginning to glisten, on the brink of tears.

Eventually, Kurthuri opened his eyes and released him, but it was several seconds before Arendi was

able to relinquish his grasp, leaving red marks in the flesh of the Librarian where his fingers had dug in.

'*Happy now?*' Arendi demanded, standing up.

Kurthuri said nothing as he left, the clang of the door signalling his exit. Corax turned his eye towards the door of the monitoring station until the Librarian entered. A raised eyebrow was all the question the primarch needed to ask.

'He is Gherith Arendi,' said Kurthuri. 'His memories, his sense of self, they cannot be replicated or faked.'

Corax exhaled, realising he had been holding his breath since the Librarian had begun his test.

'Good news, my lord,' said Soukhounou. He looked at Kurthuri. 'You seem unhappy about something.'

The Librarian shook his head and cast a meaningful glance at Corax and then to the commander.

'Give us a moment,' said the primarch, nodding towards the door. 'Please.'

Soukhounou left them without comment.

'He is hiding something,' Kurthuri quietly confided when the door was closed. 'A secret, deep where I can't see it.'

'Like the others?'

'Possibly. Each is individual – there is nothing I can do to ascertain the nature of what they wish to keep from me.'

'But are they *loyal*?'

'I cannot give you a guarantee, but none of them are *disloyal*.'

'What does that mean?' Corax demanded, frowning. 'If they are not disloyal then they must be loyal, yes?'

'I'm sorry, but they are all harbouring a secret, my lord. A shared secret, I would guess, considering that all of them arrived together. While that remains, I cannot be one hundred per cent certain of their motives. But, for what it is worth, I detect no animosity towards us, and when I probe with images of the traitors it provokes a profound hate-response.'

'I understand,' said Corax. He saw that Kurthuri was almost dead on his feet. 'Go and sleep – four full hours. If anyone disturbs you then they will answer to me.'

'Thank you, Lord Corax.'

'Send Soukhounou back to me when you leave.'

Kurthuri saluted and departed. A few seconds later, the commander returned.

'So do we trust him?' he asked.

Corax looked at the vid-screen again and knew that the decision was his alone.

'Yes,' he said. 'Division, distrust and doubt – the three greatest plagues Horus has unleashed upon the galaxy. We could destroy the enemy overnight to the last man and still die from these wounds ten thousand years later.'

'How can we heal the whole galaxy?' asked Soukounou. 'We have not yet even won the war.'

'Perhaps the two things are one and the same,' Corax said, almost lost in the thought. He revived his focus and looked sharply at the leader of the Falcons. 'Find me the ranking members of the arriving groups and have them attend council in the morning. If Arendi has been passed as fit in the meantime, have him come as well.'

'You have a plan?' Soukhounou grinned at the thought and his enthusiasm touched Corax, who smiled back.

'It is time to stem some of the bleeding caused by Horus.' The primarch's smile faded and his eyes narrowed. 'And time to inflict some wounds of our own.'

FIVE

Scarato
[DV -80 days]

The leaders of the Legion remnants assembled by Corax were a mix of line officers and sergeants for the most part, the odd lieutenant amongst them – warriors of higher rank tended to have been closer to their primarchs at the outset of the civil war. Seated around a long table brought into the grand hall for the assembly, they looked at the primarch with a mixture of hope, wariness and awe.

He did not stand up, preferring not to overwhelm the delegates with his physical presence. For the same reason, he had not donned his armour but was dressed in a simple bodysuit of light grey beneath a long charcoal-coloured coat. Like the throne upon which he sat, the clothes had been made for him as a token of favour of Naima by Scaratoan craftsmen and women.

It had been a long time, over two years Terran-standard, since he had worn much else other than his armour. He had wondered what it would be like, fearing that perhaps he would feel underdressed, but in fact it allowed him to think more like a civil leader than a general.

'Rank is irrelevant,' Corax began. 'The hierarchies of old, the titles of centurion and warsmith, adjutatorius and lieutenant-armourer are meaningless. For all of you, structure is a thing of memory, and tables of organisation a topic of nostalgia. The Raven Guard know this as well as you, though you are sundered from your primarchs and the upper echelons of the Legions whose liveries you bear.'

Corax gestured towards his commanders, sitting to his right.

'This is the entirety of my command staff. Captains of the Falcons, Talons, Hawks and Raptors. My Legion numbers a few thousand warriors. A handful of companies by the old determining of strength. Many of you lead squads, and some less than that. For years now you have fought simply to survive. Some of you have tried to reach Terra or sought to reunite with your Legions but for most of us that is not an option.' He looked pointedly at Warsmith Annovuldi of the Iron Warriors, and then to Kasati Nuon of the Night Lords and the few others representing warriors whose primarchs had sided with Horus. 'And there are those of you that know you can never return to your Legions even when we are victorious. You have, I think, suffered the greatest betrayal of all, and I have nothing but admiration for your courage, loyalty and determination despite the direst circumstances into which you have been plunged.'

Corax looked at his hands, laid on the polished wood of the table, pale against the dark grain. It helped to steady his thoughts. In many ways the gathering was very different from those early councils on Lycaeus, which had been held in abandoned sub-ducts and conducted in whispers. But though the

environment had changed the aim was the same and he thought back to the first days of the resistance. His first task had been morale; to convince others that it was not only possible for them to overthrow their captors but to persuade them it was inevitable. He faced that same task with these broken forces. They had proven willing to fight, but he had to give them a vision of what they were fighting for, and he had to instil in them the belief that not only could they win but that their victory was assured. To do so, he drew on every fibre of his primarch being to speak with absolute authority.

'From today a new phase of war begins. Our numbers are few compared to the might of those that oppose us, but we have weapons with a power Horus could only dream of wielding. We serve the Emperor, not ourselves, and that will give us a strength that outmatches anything the craven traitors possess. That strength will bring us allies, by the thousands, the millions, the billions. Mankind does not desire a tyrant to rule over them and – despite the efforts of the Word Bearers who proselytise his elevation as a new Emperor – the Arch-Traitor cannot hide his true nature. His followers are beasts and degenerates, pillaging and enslaving those weaker than themselves.'

Corax looked at Branne, Agapito and Arendi.

'What is weakness?'

'An illusion,' said Branne, who smiled in recollection, using the primarch's words spoken during the early days of the Lycaeus uprising. 'It is a label oppressors use as a whip to belittle their victims. Only those that believe the lies, who refuse to see their own strengths, are truly weak.

'And what is strength?'

'True strength comes from knowing one's own value is dependent upon the value of others,' said Arendi. It had been only a short time since he and the other survivors of the primarch's guard had arrived, but already he showed signs of returning health. His face was filling out, eyes brighter, skin smoother. 'It is recognising the bond between us all and acting together for the cause of all.'

Nodding, Corax turned his attention back to the others around the table. Many seemed unconvinced, but that was to be expected.

'You doubt that we can achieve much in our broken state,' the primarch said, speaking softly. He picked out one of the Iron Hands, whose arms and upper body had been replaced by augmetics and bionics. 'Kasdar, you are the product of many hands, yes?'

'Countless are the labourers at the forges who smelted the metal for my prosthetics, and countless more toiled with solder and pin to create the complex weave of nerve and circuit that interfaces with my mind.' The legionary extended a clawed hand and formed a fist with artificial fingers, tiny cogs spinning in the joints of his hand. 'But it is all guided by my will.'

'A thousand disparate pieces, each of purpose and value, brought together under the control of a single mind,' said Corax. 'We shall be the same. A machine, an organism. Of many parts working separately, but invisibly, silently bound by common purpose and thought. I do not ask you to swear loyalty to me, for there is no greater oath you have sworn than by your deeds in the name of the Emperor. I do not ask you to become Raven Guard, for the blood of other fathers and the customs of other worlds have shaped you. You are each what you are, individual – but together, indivisible, we will be even greater.'

Damastor Kyil, another Iron Hand, stood up and looked to Corax for permission to speak. He received it with a nod.

'I admire your courage, Lord Corax, as much as anyone here.' Kyil's face was for the most part made of metal and ceramic, glinting in the light of the hall. Only one eye and ear were left of the flesh that he had been born with. 'I answered your astropathic call to stand amongst brothers again, and I am proud of those that sit around this table with me, and those in the dorms and ships elsewhere. Pride, though, and determination are not enough to win battles. You admit that the Raven Guard are but a few thousand.

Perhaps another few hundred of us you have dredged together from surrounding systems and sectors. Even if we had warships, weapons, ammunition, battle tanks and the full stores of our armouries, there are not enough warriors to face the smallest of the traitor flotillas heading for Terra. Our only hope must be to join the defence before Horus's forces have the Sol system besieged.'

Sitting down, Kyil received nods and approving looks from many of the others. Branne looked to stand to voice a rebuttal but Corax stayed him with a raised hand. He gestured to Captain Noriz.

'Your wall-brothers await you at the Imperial Palace, captain. Is it your desire to return to Lord Dorn and await the attack of Horus's forces?'

The captain seemed hesitant to reply. He rubbed his fingers through his close-cropped hair and stood, hands clasped together. He looked first at Corax, then Kyil, and then back to the primarch.

'Yes,' he said with an apologetic nod. 'With all my heart I would desire to stand with the Emperor's finest upon the walls of the greatest fortress in the galaxy.'

'Thank you, captain.'

Corax turned to his left, where Arcatus had been sitting in silence, listening intently to everything that had been said.

'As representative of the Custodians, whose duties should place you at the Emperor's side, what do you say? Do we return to Terra?'

'By the will of the Emperor and Malcador I left Terra at your side, Lord Corax. I was doubtful of what could be accomplished by so few warriors but I have been proven wrong. Out here our fight still serves to defend Terra.'

'Where there is oppression there is always resentment, no matter how cowed a populace might be,' said Corax. 'The Legiones Astartes have never been kindly, not to many that were forced to compliance by the edge of a sword. But we were never tyrants, not even the worst of us, not before Horus turned his back on the oaths we had all sworn. I did not bring you to Scarato on a whim. Here is a lesson not just in guerrilla fighting but in winning wars against a far superior foe using hearts and minds as weapons. Any world where the traitors maintain their authority with threat of blade and gun is ripe for targeting. A few warriors, even a single legionary, can ignite a rebellion that can waylay or draw in hundreds of traitors.'

'Perhaps for the Raven Guard,' said Damastor Kyil, an artificial lung wheezing as he drew in a breath. 'Not all of us grew up in a prison, nor spent years fighting far from the command of our primarchs. You take that culture for granted, Lord Corax.'

'I do not,' the primarch replied. 'You will soon each have first-hand experience of the fighting I describe. And you will have close acquaintance with those that have been terrorised into submission. I demand no promise or oath beyond that you accompany us on our next attack and learn from the Raven Guard how to wage the war we must now fight. After that, you are free to go your own ways, to attempt to return to Terra or other home worlds as you choose, or to remain under my command.'

'This next attack, where will it be?' asked Kasati Nuon, fingers flexing as though they were constricting around the throat of some poor victim.

'A world imprisoned by Horus's followers, in the Carandiru system. We will liberate it.'

'I know this system,' Captain Noriz said sharply. All eyes turned to him. 'The Two-Hundred and Fourteenth Expedition led by Lord Dorn himself razed the capital and then built the Winter City on the ruins. If it has been turned into a prison… The walls of the Imperial Fists do not easily fall, Lord Corax.'

'Indeed, and it is to such walls the Emperor is trusting the future of the Imperium,' said Corax. 'But countless are the fortifications that have been overcome, thought impregnable by those behind them. Tell me, Captain Noriz, you spent much time fortifying Deliverance and Kiavahr, and your Legion is expert at both assault and defence of siegeworks. What would be your strategy for overcoming the defences of the

Winter City?'

'Given our present company, that is an easy answer.' The Imperial Fist looked at the others around the table and smiled. 'It is the best way to take *any* fortress. From the inside.'

SIX

Scarato
[DV -80 days]

After Corax ended the council, Soukhounou met with his fellow commanders in a chamber adjoining the hall. The room was ostentatious, filled with gilded furniture, the high ceiling decorated with floral plaster reliefs. On the walls were scenes of nobles at leisure – hunting along a steep canyon atop the backs of hunched lizards, riding slender solar-sailed barges over a majestic waterfall, or banqueting at night beneath a firework-lit sky.

'Our brother-in-arms is returned to us!' Branne's exclamation caused Soukhounou to turn as the commander greeted Arendi wrist to wrist in the warrior's fashion, pounding the other Space Marine on the shoulder. Agapito lifted a fist to his chest in a more reserved welcome.

'A day I often thought might never come to pass,' said Arendi. His expression brightened as Branne stepped back. 'Long anticipated, and heartily welcome. I wish it had been sooner.'

'We cannot change the past,' said Agapito. 'Fortunately we can still change the future.'

'Yes, that is true.' Arendi looked at Soukhounou as though noticing him for the first time. 'Lieutenant Soukhounou, isn't it?'

'Commander now,' he replied. It had been an unexpected development, but rapid promotion was one of the unavoidable aspects of the Legion since the massacre. First Solaro had been outed as a traitor, and then Nuran Tesk had died in the assault on the Perfect Fortress just weeks after being placed in command. Soukhounou was not a superstitious man but he tried not the think about the fates of his predecessors too often.

'You are Terran, yes? We've fought together, haven't we?'

'Not side by side,' admitted Soukhounou. 'There was little occasion until Isstvan for me to share air with the primarch's guard. And yes, I hail from Terra originally.'

'Then that explains why my brothers greet me with smiles yet a cell is the welcome I received from you.'

'Forgive me, but the circumstances that led to my promotion make me wary of those that claim loyalty with false guise. You were treated no differently from any other that responded to the primarch's call.'

'False guise?' Arendi looked confused and turned to Branne and Agapito. 'What false guise?'

'A long story, Gherith,' said Branne. 'One that will live long in infamy and shame. It can wait. Soukhounou, be assured that this *is* Commander Arendi. You must trust to the judgement of the primarch, and those that shared air with him since we were children. This distrust will be our undoing – an injury

inflicted by the traitors that continues to nag at us.'

Taking a deep breath, Soukhounou acquiesced with a nod.

'You are right,' he said, raising a fist of brotherhood to Arendi. 'It was wrong of me to be so suspicious. However, I would urge caution still when dealing with the other legionaries not of Deliverance. Nothing can be guaranteed in these trying times.'

They stood for a moment in silence, each taken by his own thoughts.

'A slightly disturbing thought, isn't it?' said Arendi, breaking the quiet. He looked past Soukhounou at the murals.

'What is?' Soukhounou asked. 'Painting on walls?'

'The elite of this world, living like kings,' said Arendi. 'I fear that you have displaced the Sons of Horus only to make room for more veiled dictators.'

The others looked at the pictures, trying to understand what the former commander meant.

'There is no evidence that the planetary aristocracy mistreated any of their subjects prior to the arrival of the traitors,' Agapito said. 'Scarato came to compliance peacefully.'

'You don't see a life of privilege as evidence of excess?' Arendi looked at Soukhounou and then to Branne. 'The benefit of a youth not spent as a cell-brother, I'd say.'

'If you have an accusation, make it plain,' said Soukhounou. 'Do you think any of us less dedicated to the cause? I'd say your time away has clouded your memory, or your judgement.'

'No accusation, I assure you. It is simply a matter of fact that those who have not felt the touch of the lash can never imagine its sting. Oppression comes in many forms. Not all tyrants are immediately obvious. By subtle word, by application of quiet threat and bribe they coerce and cajole. Righteousness requires terrible effort.'

'It is as if you speak with the voice of your father, old Reqaui,' said Branne, forcing a laugh. 'Political discussions must wait on more pressing matters. We need to devise dispositions and arrangements for the forthcoming campaign for presentation to Lord Corax. He made it plain that he seeks to leave within days.'

'We need to pick task force leaders and assign commands to the other legionaries,' added Agapito.

'And I will leave you to it,' said Arendi, with a curt nod.

'You should stay,' said Agapito.

'Yes,' said Soukhounou in a gesture of conciliation. Though he did not care for Arendi's attitude since returning, he was influential amongst the Deliverance-born legionaries. His return would be taken as a good sign by many in the Raven Guard. 'You have an insight that will prove valuable. A perspective none of us can imagine. And even if the current situation sees you without rank, you were once commander.'

Arendi looked at Soukhounou, perhaps trying to judge if there was any further meaning behind his words. His brow creased slightly and his lips thinned.

'I hold no command now,' he said. 'If Lord Corax sees fit to restore me, then I will join your deliberations. Until then I must see to the welfare of the warriors that came with me.'

Stalling further protest, Arendi turned and left without another word. Branne shook his head and glared at Soukhounou.

'I thought you would offer more welcome to a long-lost son of Deliverance. Think on what we suffered on the fields of Isstvan and then think on the hardships he and the others must have endured in the years afterwards. Arendi is an example to us all, and you should not be so dismissive of him.'

'Does it not make you think, brothers?' said Soukhounou, looking at the door as if Arendi was still there. 'Who of us has not been changed by these past years? There is something in Gherith that I do not think I like.'

‘The primarch speaks for him,’ said Agapito, though he looked uncertain. ‘We should not second-guess Lord Corax.’

‘We should set aside such thoughts of division,’ said Branne. ‘Why can’t you be glad that our own have survived and been returned to us?’

The question was left hanging in silence as Agapito and Soukhonou exchanged a look. Soukhounou decided that this was no time to voice any argument against Arendi’s loyalties or agenda. It was obvious that the bonds of history were far stronger than that of Legion alone. The Raven Guard were all fiercely loyal to Corax, but a doctrine that promoted independent thought and self-sufficiency was also prone to creating moments of fracture as personal identity surpassed group allegiance.

‘With Corax’s command that the other newcomers are to be spread amongst the Raven Guard companies there will be rivalries and division enough without resurrecting old suspicions between Terrans and the Deliverance-born,’ he said.

‘I concede to your superior knowledge on the subject, brothers.’ Branne raised his hands in appeasement. ‘We must bury our differences, or be sure that Lord Corax will bury them for us, and our rank. This is no time to let small gaps become gaping chasms.’

‘Of course,’ said Agapito. ‘We have all been put out of sorts by Arendi’s return. In a few days’ time we will be more settled and the matter nothing more than memory.’

Soukhounou hoped what his fellow commander said would hold true but could not help but worry that Arendi’s return signified something far more damaging.

SEVEN

Kapel-5642A
[DV -67 days]

Red littered the corridor: the red of Mechanicum robes and the blood of those wearing them. Here and there steel and silver and brass stood out in the bright flare of Corax's lightning claws. The darker shadows of power armour provided a softer contrast – a handful of Sons of Horus that had been overseeing the shipyard.

'Branne, move forward and trigger targeting.'

The primarch stopped, standing over the crumpled ruin of a traitor with the markings of a sergeant. Looking down at the renegade, Corax did not feel anger or hatred. Disappointment, perhaps. There were those that he had learned had refused to follow the Warmaster into rebellion, but the Sons of Horus could not be blamed for following their primarch. He wondered if the dead sergeant had required persuading or if a last small step to turn against the Emperor had been easy to take, the culmination of a longer process.

'One hundred and eighty seconds. Orbital defences are responding.'

Nearly a kilometre away, on the other side of the orbital facility, Branne and his Raptors had breached the main transmitter array for the star base. It would be a simple enough task to set up a comm-link between the *Avenger* and the berth monitoring systems that policed the space traffic around five massive starship hulls being assembled above the asteroid-base of Kapel-5642A.

Corax had ordered the strike just in time. One of the new battleships was almost operational, the others nearing completion within weeks. Not the Mechanicum's finest work, Corax assumed, but speedily built in relation to the decades-long construction normally required. The primarch knew first-hand the efficiencies of forced labour and interned workers, and Horus's allies in the Mechanicum had been replicating such methods across dozens of forge worlds and shipyards like Kapel.

'Sixty seconds,' Corax told his warriors as he pulled back down the corridor towards the entry point blasted by his Stormbird. '*Avenger*, do you have the berth grid matrix?'

'*Affirmative, Lord Corax,*' Ephrenia replied. '*Programming torpedo firing solutions now.*'

Clad in golden armour, Arcatus Vindix Centurio of the Custodian Guard burst into the corridor from a junction ahead, accompanied by another six of the superhuman warriors; survivors of many battles since they had departed Terra to guard the gene-formulas gifted to Corax by the Emperor. They cut down augmented soldiers and semi-mechanical servitors amidst the flare of the powered blades and boltgun flash of their Guardian Spears. The Custodian cleaved a hulking praetorian servitor in two with a sweep

of his halberd, shattering gears and bones with equal ease. Stepping astride the remnants, he raised his weapon in salute to the approaching primarch.

'I am beginning to see the merit in taking the fight to the enemy,' said Arcatus. 'There is more than one way to protect the Emperor. Sometimes a solid offensive is the best defence.'

'If Horus cannot reach Terra, the Emperor is safe,' replied Corax. The two of them fell into step together, picking their way past the steaming, smoking, bleeding remnants of the Mechanicum warriors that clogged the passage. 'This is a war we simply cannot afford to lose.'

Arcatus nodded. He paused to drive the tip of his glaive into the squirming body of a serpentine machine-beast jittering under the toppled corpse of a combat-servitor.

'A handful of years ago, when Horus turned at Isstvan, it was a shock to everybody,' he said. 'We of the Legiones Custodes had to believe that the worst might come, but in the back of their minds many thought it impossible that the renegade Warmaster could actually take on the might of the Imperium.'

'I never doubted it,' said Corax.

'You must understand how powerful denial can be. Yes, Horus had destroyed three Legions, or close enough, and as his schemes unfolded the Dark Angels and Ultramarines were removed from the main theatre of war. But even then there were those that could not envisage a galaxy where the traitor forces held the balance of power.'

There had been some amongst the Raven Guard upper echelons who had thought the same. Corax had allowed them to give voice to their concerns, but he had never harboured any doubts about Horus's abilities as a war leader.

'What is impossible, to my mind,' Arcatus continued, 'is the notion that Horus would even embark on such a cataclysmic course of action without being *absolutely certain* he would win. Throughout the Great Crusade, Horus proved time and time again that he was capable of tremendous victories, conquering swathes of the galaxy through planning, charisma and sheer bloody-mindedness.'

'He is also adept at utilising the strengths of his brothers to his best advantage,' added Corax, somewhat bitterly. 'Always ready to ask his brothers to sacrifice their Legions in the shadows, away from the annals and picts of the remembrancers; always arriving in time to deliver the final blow. I struck Horus once for usurping the victories of the Raven Guard for his own glory, a moment that no doubt festers in the Warmaster's thoughts. I aim to repeat the insult, whenever I can.'

'He has done the same with his rebellion, blunting the counter-attack of the loyalist forces with the likes of the Emperor's Children, the Iron Warriors and Word Bearers. Month by month, year by year the Warmaster has consolidated his position, readying for the strike that is sure to come – an assault on Terra.'

They turned into the corridor leading back to the entry blasted into the station by the Stormbirds and Thunderhawks.

'And there are those only too willing to favour the side that appears to be in the ascendancy,' said Corax with a sad shake of the head, 'They judge their futures more secure with the rising star than the old elite. Rebellion is in vogue across the Imperium, whether for the traitors or simply against the Emperor.

'Dorn was adamant that Horus could not win without toppling the Imperial capital, and I agreed. Where we differ is in the manner in which that can be stopped. The Fist of the Emperor is determined to make a stand at the walls of the Palace itself, but it is defeatist to assume that the traitors will reach the Sol system regardless of the efforts of loyal warriors.'

The primarch of the Raven Guard believed – had to believe – that history would prove him right. Horus was no fool, but he had planned for the Raven Guard to be wiped out on the blackened fields of Isstvan. Their continued existence, and the attacks launched by Corax and his followers, delayed the last assault,

demonstrating the lie that a battle for Terra was inevitable.

'Thirty seconds,' Corax announced, needing no chronometer to keep track of time – his inner sense was as accurate as any conventional timepiece.

He bounded up the ramp of the drop-ship – the selfsame drop-ship that had lifted him from Isstvan, he noted – and waited at the top for the withdrawing Custodians and Raven Guard with him to file past.

'Breaking a few warships will not swing the course of the war,' said Arcatus, stopping beside Corax.

'No, but their absence will be felt. One lost convoy will not break the rebellion either, you are right,' replied the primarch. 'A freed world will not stem the tide on its own. Yet they come from the same source, and victory is simply the accumulation of countless unimportant events and decisions in your favour. Every defeat Horus suffers brings time for Dorn to build his defences. Every shipyard destroyed or taken back limits the traitors' reach. Every world kept in the Imperial fold or delivered from the traitors stretches Horus's resources. Every gun and suit of warplate withheld from the renegades adds up and in time they will be the measure of our enemies' defeat.'

Corax waved Arcatus into the depths of the drop-ship.

'We swiftly approach the tipping point,' the primarch said. 'The Sons of Horus are on the offensive, hounds of war finally unleashed by their lord after the others have weakened us. The Warmaster desires a great battle to end all battles, one final confrontation to prove himself superior.

'We will not give him that. Lycaeus was not seized overnight. It was taken by meticulous preparation and a thousand tiny victories. The Warmaster will not be stopped by a single battle. On a dozen worlds, a hundred worlds, a thousand worlds, the Emperor's loyal servants will resist, each taking their toll, bleeding dry a rebellion held together only by ego and desperation.'

'You think you can wage that war?'

'The greatest enemy is the one you cannot see, and so cannot fight. That is the essence of the Raven Guard.'

With a roar of thrusters, the drop-ship lifted up from the orbital facility. The ramp closed; Corax's last view was of immense torpedoes cruising past only a few kilometres away, heading unerringly towards their targets. In the distance orbital stations and monitor vessels were just starting to detect the threat in their midst.

They would be too late. The *Avenger* was already turning away, ready to sweep up its assault craft and activate the reflex shields. Within three minutes the newly commissioned ships would be nothing more than molten metal and wreckage. In five minutes the *Avenger* would be heading out-system cloaked from detection, ready for the rendezvous with the rest of Corax's forces.

The primarch smiled.

'Horus will not lose the war at the walls of the Imperial Palace, but out here in the forgotten places between the stars, in the darkness beyond the light of his presence. This is where the Raven Guard thrive. This is where Horus will fail.'

EIGHT

The Cretherach Reach
[DV -22 days]

On the strategium of the *Steadfast*, nothing stirred. Commander Aloni stood alone among muted servitors, casting an eye across the scanning arrays and communications feeds. His attention was fixed on two displays in particular: the internal energy readout and the passive defraction antenna.

The first monitored how much sound and radiation was emanating from the huge starship: a curiously antique-looking dial – an illuminated display would itself contribute to light and energy pollution – with a red line that indicated the maximum threshold of the reflex shields. The needle wavered at the three-quarter mark, easily within tolerable limits, and the shields themselves were not running at full yield. Fully crewed and with its full complement of two hundred legionaries, the *Steadfast* would struggle to conceal its whereabouts under such conditions; but with barely a skeleton attendance and only fifty Space Marines on board it was running with higher scanning and manoeuvring capacity than usual.

Which was essential, because the defraction antenna was fixed on the plasma discharge of thirty-four more starship engines.

One was the *Wrathful Vanguard*, a strike cruiser of the Imperial Fists Legion. Captain Noriz and his small company were heading towards the other signals: traitor supply ships. Seven of the auspex contacts were convoy escorts – a pair of light cruisers, a grand cruiser and a handful of destroyers and frigates.

The traitors were cautious, one of the light cruisers moving towards the approaching VII Legion vessel, with smaller escorts heading out to cut off the strike cruiser's retreat; the transports stayed close to the guns of the remaining cruisers in case the *Wrathful Vanguard* was a decoy.

They were not wrong, but the traitors did not understand the nature of the other hunters waiting amongst the gas clouds of the Cretherach Reach. Warning data scrolled across several screens as the renegade ships scoured the surrounding void with deep-search surveyors, seeking the other ships they knew had to be waiting amongst the stellar debris. Their sensors were turned towards the scattered dust and asteroid pockets – ideal concealment for conventional ships.

They were looking in the wrong place.

The *Steadfast* drifted closer to the convoy from the opposite direction, while the *Shadowstrike* approached at a perpendicular angle. The one cruiser showed nothing on the sensor displays – as was intended – leaving Aloni to trust that the other Raven Guard ship was in the right position.

For that matter, it had taken some effort to persuade Noriz to allow his vessel to be used as bait. The

Imperial Fists captain was risking a lot, that much was true. If the reflex-shielded ships were detected too early then the whole plan would fail and the Imperial Fists would face the worst of the backlash.

All seemed to be going well, though. Aloni monitored the *Steadfast*'s progress, making minute adjustments with single attitude thrusters, nudging the starship onto a better heading as a machinist might trim away nanometres of a complex component on a las-lathe. As long as the traitors made no major course corrections the cruiser would intersect perfectly with the gaggle of lightly armed and poorly armoured freight-carriers.

The transports had mustered from the traitor-dominated forge world at Antasic IX and the manufactory of Kapel-5642A, en route to take their payloads of weapons to Carandiru. The Sons of Horus had been stretched thin over a dozen sectors by Raven Guard raids, as well as the massed assault of the Therion Cohort and their Titan Legion allies through the Euesa region, forcing the convoys to rendezvous in wilderness space like the Cretherach Reach. The beacon at Cretherach was the perfect point to bring together so many ships, and that was why the *Steadfast* and the other two ships had been lying in wait for nearly forty days.

As ship after ship had arrived, Aloni and the others had watched with growing amazement. They had hoped for a few vessels but the merchant fleet that had gathered suggested a sizeable reinforcement of Carandiru was being planned. It was a happy coincidence for the loyalists, and though the enemy were too numerous for a head-on assault it was a situation that could not be ignored.

Aloni frowned. The traitor light cruiser commander was being very bold, heading straight for the *Wrathful Vanguard* at full speed. Evidently the enemy captain was determined to spring the trap as quickly as possible, or perhaps believed he could defeat the strike cruiser without the aid of the other escorts. Noriz had to hold his nerve and get the frigates and destroyers as far away from the main convoy as possible; the grand cruiser would be too laborious to counter the Raven Guard attack and the remaining light cruiser was out of position performing scanner sweeps of the stellar debris fields.

Noriz also had to hold tight on another matter. A single communication, even a narrow-beam transmission, could give away the presence of the other two ships. Had the decoy ship been a Raven Guard vessel Aloni would not be stalking the displays so assiduously, but the Imperial Fists were an unknown quantity in these circumstances. Fine fighters, Aloni knew first-hand, but not as subtle as a warrior created under the Axioms of Corax.

Gaze fixed on the scanner returns, Aloni watched the *Wrathful Vanguard* closely, seeking some sign of what Noriz might do. It looked as though the Imperial Fists commander was going to meet the incoming light cruiser head-on, perhaps trying to force the traitor officers to commit to an attack without assistance.

It was a foolhardy move by both the Imperial Fists and the Sons of Horus; a mutual match of daring and show of ferocity to scare off the other, like two hounds baring their fangs at one another.

Aloni sighed. Years of war between the Legiones Astartes and there were still those who had learned nothing. For many foes of the Emperor the display of strength would have been enough, but this was legionaries fighting legionaries. Neither side would back down. Both ships' captains were incapable of fear and would see their threats through to actual battle.

He considered whether he was being inconsiderate of Noriz's expertise, and underestimating the poise of the Sons of Horus commander. Both having embarked upon a course of direct confrontation it was necessary to see through their actions to their consequence, knowing that to blink, to show a moment of weakness could spell disaster. They were locked on a collision course, maybe literally.

The commander of the Falcons, the corps comprised of the Raven Guard's remaining assault companies, thought of a third option as he watched the two opposing vessels powering towards each other, determined to end each other in a short-ranged conflagration. The Imperial Fists had been known to

engage heavily in honour-duelling, and the Sons of Horus were equally famed for their skill and dedication to single combat. It was entirely possible that the two commanders had, by virtue of common custom, a tacitly issued and accepted challenge between them. They would duel with starships and to the victor would go the spoils.

A flare of energy on the scanner indicated a sudden burst of thruster power. It came from the *Wrathful Vanguard*. Noriz's ship burned its retros hard, swinging away from the light cruiser and flanking escorts. At first it looked as though the Imperial Fists commander had baulked at the attack, but Aloni knew better.

'Praise to you, captain,' whispered Aloni as he watched the Imperial Fists turn and draw the smaller enemy ships further from the convoy.

Long-range lance fire scattered returns across the display as the Sons of Horus moved into the pursuit, the spray of particles from activated void shields demonstrating that the officers of the *Wrathful Vanguard* had left it to the last moment before countering, ensuring the enemy would be committed.

Checking the *Steadfast*'s location, Aloni confirmed that his ship was almost in position. The next few minutes passed slowly as he watched his Imperial Fists allies dragging the enemy ships out of the battle sphere. Noriz could have easily ordered the reactors to overpower and burned away at full speed but instead he was staying just outside optimal range of the pursuing cruiser, trusting to the void shields to withstand the sporadic laser fire directed at them. It was canny fighting by both commanders. The Sons of Horus could not accelerate past battle speed without risking the *Wrathful Vanguard* turning and giving them a full broadside whilst they were vulnerable, but on the other hand Noriz was making sure he kept the enemy hopeful.

Moving to the engineering console, Aloni activated the internal communications.

'Power up, full battle readiness.'

There was no need for spoken confirmation. Almost immediately the lights flickered to full power and displays and indicators blazed into life all across the strategium. The spread of multi-coloured glows reminded Aloni of the Deliverance Day celebrations across Kiavahr, when the tech-priests allowed the people of the forge world to commemorate those that had fallen to rescue the world from the tech-guilds. 'Allowed' was perhaps not the right term; the day of memory was enshrined in law by edict of Lord Corax as part of the agreement that had seen the Mechanicum take control of the planet.

Horus's rebellion had ended that. No more Deliverance Day parades. No more celebrations of the ending of Old Night. Darkness had been brought back to the galaxy.

A single whoop of a siren signalled the move to attack stance. As well as this audio warning, a recovery rune flashed across the comms of every legionary aboard. Like statues coming to life, the bridge officers waiting dormant around the edges of the strategium powered up their suits. Eyes of yellow and red blazed into life as their auto-senses activated. Black-armoured giants stepped out of the diminishing gloom.

Aloni rattled off a string of commands as his lieutenants strode to their stations and servitors burbled into consciousness. His next act was to send a communication to Captain Noriz.

'Gratitude, captain. I did not know the Imperial Fists were so adept at playing the part of bait.' It took a few moments for the reply to crackle back.

'*We are the Sons of Dorn, the wall-brothers,*' Noriz replied. '*We are used to letting the foe throw themselves at us. It is nice to actually withdraw once we have their attention.*'

'I suggest you do that, captain. I will see you when we rendezvous with the fleet.'

'*Good hunting, Commander Aloni.*'

While the *Wrathful Vanguard* moved up to full power, opening the distance from the pursuing Sons of Horus as the Imperial Fists raced to get enough separation for a warp translation, the *Steadfast* arrowed into the heart of the enemy convoy. The power from the reflex shields diverted back into the void shield

generators as the cruiser slid into range. Even now, fully revealed, it took a couple of minutes for the enemy sensors to detect the approaching ship.

As the *Steadfast* dived down into the midst of the convoy the *Shadowstrike* dropped its reflex shields and appeared about thirty thousand kilometres to port, on a crossing course.

'All batteries, open fire!' snapped Aloni as the main guns came into range. 'Targets free!'

The Sons of Horus grand cruiser was turning ponderously towards the suddenly revealed Raven Guard ships, too far away to prevent the pair of void-predators slicing into the transports. Missiles, plasma and shells ripped into the virtually unprotected freighters while sporadic, ineffectual fire from enemy defence turrets splashed harmlessly against the warships' fully active shields.

Blossom after blossom of exploding gas and plasma charted the course of the two hunters, one cutting down through the mass of cargo-haulers, the other moving along the length of the convoy. The enemy light cruiser turned sharply about but, with the other escorts so out of position, its commander was reluctant to face a pair of enemy vessels single-handed. The Sons of Horus could do nothing as the Raven Guard turned together, broadsides and dorsal weapons still blazing, and blasted a path back out of the fleet.

For some it might have been difficult to withdraw from the battle without once laying a shot upon the warships of the traitor Legion, but Aloni was well-versed in the Axioms of his primarch. There was nothing to be gained and everything to be risked by direct confrontation. The greater prize had been seized.

Twelve freighters destroyed, and another seven crippled, in a single attack run.

'Losses not easily replaced,' said Lieutenant Shaak, standing by the sensor array, sensing Aloni's mood. 'Legionaries without ammunition cannot storm Terra.'

'True,' said Aloni. He stared at the dispersing clouds that were all that remained of the obliterated transports. 'Nor can they supply Carandiru. It would have been good to capture one or two, though. We're not without our own supply issues, but that will have to wait for another day.'

'Just as well we're used to fighting with fists and sticks, eh?' said Shaak. His tone turned grim. 'Give me a company of real warriors over the gang-brats of Cthonia. Thought they could take us out and flit off to Terra in glory, did they? We'll make these bastards regret not finishing the job on Isstvan.'

'We certainly will, lieutenant. We certainly will.'

NINE

Carandiru
[DV -30 minutes, adjusted Terran standard]

The golden flash of the Stormbird a few kilometres to the west drew Sergeant Chamell's eye for a moment. It did the same for the crews manning the anti-air turrets around the target zone, drawing their attention away from the lone Whispercutter gliding silently towards the power station concealed by the moonless night. Flak erupted across the clouds into which the drop-ship had disappeared, followed by traces of las-fire seeking the Stormbird in the gloom.

Clinging to the side of the anti-grav drop-craft, loosed twenty minutes earlier by the same Stormbird, Chamell looked down at the energy plant. Searchlights played across the night clouds, seeking signs of the gunship, never once moving towards the east where the Mor Deythan were approaching. Men lined the outer walls and filled the guard towers; defences erected to guard against an uprising by the planet's prisoner population that would, in a few minutes, be proved totally worthless.

It amused Chamell to think that 'heightened security' often had the opposite consequence. The Raven Guard attack had brought guards spilling out of their barracks, heading to their embedded guns and defence positions, staring out at the burgeoning night full of fear and trepidation. Cannon turrets and energy fences had sprung into life, ready to ward away an offensive on the ground.

Patrols were doing their rounds along some of the alleys and streets between distribution hubs and barracks, turbine halls and wind farms. The complex was easily seven or eight square kilometres in size and the men guarding it woefully few for such a task. As more soldiers in red-and-black fatigues spilled up from an underground bunker towards the wall, Chamell smiled.

So busy, yet so ineffective.

It was good for the Mor Deythan. The more the enemy looked outwards and hurried about, the more they emptied the heart of their defence. Already overstretched – who would waste resources on guards for a power station that was all but impregnable to the locals? – the garrison made up in haste and bluster what they lacked in diligence and discipline.

They had small reason to be fearful of airborne attack. The outlying defence cannons certainly put up an impressive amount of firepower, enough to dissuade anything but an orbital approach. And that would prove troublesome thanks to the ring of defences arranged around the central complexes of the prison itself a few kilometres away; guns and missiles capable of firing into orbit, powered by the stations the Mor Deythan were looking to eliminate. Huge turbine stacks and overhead cables sloping up to towering

pylons that led out into the wilderness made landing difficult.

Difficult but not impossible.

Senderwat was one of the best pilots in the Shadowmasters and he guided the long, slender form of the Whispercutter along the line of pylons and cable, never more than a few metres above one hundred thousand volts of electricity. The electromagnetic output of the energy network provided further insurance against the tracking devices of the power plant's scanners. It was the Raven Guard way of war, to turn a hostile environment and the enemy's own defences into an advantage.

'Hot zone in thirty seconds,' Senderwat warned. He spoke through his armour's external vocalisers, avoiding any vox-signal that might be detected.

Banking to the right, the Whispercutter moved out from the covering aura of the power lines, circling towards one of the central control buildings, away from the generators and curtain wall.

It would have been a relatively simple task to annihilate the station with an orbital blast, even with the defence lasers close by – reflex shields were better than void shields in such a situation – but there were several power plants supplying the main guard complexes and each would have to be taken out in turn. Instead, a well-planned legionary strike against one station would provide the means to overcome the whole prison's power structure.

The Whispercutter levelled, just a few hundred metres from its destination. Immense cooling towers surrounded the five-storey central control building, itself a target no more than a dozen metres square. Narrow walkways and roads sprawled beneath the descending Raven Guard, far too small for the craft – or a confident jump pack landing. Jump packs would also restrict them once they were inside the station control tower.

Senderwat guided the silent craft unerringly between the rising edifices around them, broad wingtips skimming centimetres away from disaster. Not once did Chamell entertain the thought that they might crash. Senderwat pulled the Whispercutter to a sharp stop above the control terminus. The gleam from windows splashed across bare ferrocrete and metal just a few metres below them. Chamell could see patches of shadow as people moved around inside.

'Power up,' he ordered. His display sprang into life as the other legionaries allowed power to flood through their battleplate. 'Drop!'

The five Mor Deythan – Chamell, Fasur, Senderwat, Korin and Strang – let go of the Whispercutter and fell to the roof, landings cushioned by their specially augmented armour; as well as the normal fibre bundles inside the suits, additional calliper bracings and microservos boosted the joints, allowing for smoother, quieter movement.

Above them the Whispercutter's auto-guidance systems lifted it away, heading after the departing Stormbird.

Chamell motioned towards an access door off to the left in the corner of the building. Fasur led the way across the flat roof, pistol loaded with silent gas-powered bolts in one hand, combat knife in the other. For this mission the Shadowmasters had left behind their heavier weapons to maximise stealth and speed. The mission would be decided at close quarters.

Fasur stopped beside a numeral keypad on a pedestal a short distance from the door. He looked back at Chamell, who shook his head and made a cutting motion across his throat. Fasur nodded and waved Strang to the door.

Strang's slender power fist shone only a little more than the lenses of his helm as he found the plated hinges of the door and pushed, separating each quietly from the frame. He lifted the door away carefully, and placed it against the wall.

Stairs led down into the control complex.

Chamell took the lead, descending to a hallway at the bottom of the steps. There was no glass panel in the door, so he checked the auspex display on his wrist. No life signs within five metres on this level.

He eased open the door onto a landing with more steps and an elevator, as well as a passageway leading onto the rest of the floor. Energy signals indicated a swathe of network and power lines – unoccupied maintenance and database chambers. The sergeant signalled for the others to follow and headed down the stairs again, moving slowly and quietly.

Detailing Senderwat, Strang and Korin to secure the lower levels and the ground floor entrance, Chamell moved out into the corridor on the fourth floor with Fasur at his side. Bare windowless wall stretched along the right; two sealed doors, a branching passage and an open door to the left. The corridor continued for the length of the building, turning left at the far end.

Pistol ready, Chamell advanced to the first door. Fasur continued past to the next, and stopped.

The tiniest of vibrations from the wrist-mounted monitor alerted Chamell to an approaching signal. He glanced down to see two returns on the display, about to turn into the corridor at the far end.

Chamell moved across to the other side of the passageway so that he could see past his fellow Shadowmaster. Fasur had noticed the approaching threat too and stood stock still against the door, pistol raised.

Chamell froze, allowing himself to become one with his surroundings. He sensed the flicker of the glow strips along the ceiling, the tiniest dimming and brightening. He felt the moments of dimness and latched onto them, feeling them stretch out, pulling them into an eternity.

There was no real shadow in the corridor but the two warriors of the Mor Deythan did not need to remain hidden for long. In the few moments their extraordinary powers granted them, two uniformed human soldiers had rounded the corner, utterly oblivious to the two massive warriors ahead.

Fasur fired, his pistol coughing gently as a gas-propelled round sped towards the guard on the right. Her eyes were just beginning to widen with surprise as her brain registered the two intruders, a moment before the bolt took her in the throat. It detonated quietly, ripping out windpipe and spine, and almost severing her head.

The other had half a second to move the muzzle of his autogun a few centimetres before Chamell's silenced bolt pierced his upper chest, punching through breastplate and flesh. It exploded, buried inside lungs and heart, shredding both with a fountain of blood.

Both soldiers collapsed, guns clattering to the floor.

Chamell crossed back to the door and eased it open, finding himself in a small storage lockup. Coming back out he saw Fasur exiting the room ahead. The legionary looked back at his leader and shook his head.

The two of them moved on. Fasur held position at the corridor, currently empty, while Chamell investigated a signal in the last room coming off the passageway.

Augmented hearing and suit auto-senses picked up heavy breathing as the sergeant stopped beside the open door. He rounded the frame with pistol ready, but held his fire. Chair tipped back against a file-laden set of shelves, a guard lay asleep, the peak of his cap drawn over his eyes, feet up on the monitor desk. Two vid-screens showed static-broken images that flicked through various pict-feeds on rotation.

Sheathing his knife, Chamell grabbed the man by the throat, gauntlet encompassing his whole neck. A simple twist detached the man's vertebrae before he was even fully awake. Chamell left the corpse to sag, easing the chair back onto four legs. He checked the vid-monitors but there did not seem to be anything to indicate that there was another security station. This was, after all, just a power station – not the prison itself, or the commandant's keep.

He rejoined Fasur and they followed the short corridor across the middle of the storey, which had a door

to either side, facing each other, and a heavier portal at the end. Chamell motioned for his partner to go left while he headed for the right-hand door.

The augur showed multiple signals behind both doors. Fasur looked to the sergeant for instructions and received a series of gestures indicating that they would go in hard and fast. Fasur nodded and braced himself next to the door.

From his belt Chamell palmed two small, disc-like detonators. One was an electromagnetic pulse grenade, the other a blind-screen device. He primed both with his thumb and slammed into the door, smashing it open.

The two discs left his hand at the same moment. He stepped out for an instant while the two grenades detonated. Electricity sparked and blackness shrouded the air.

Into this whirling gloom stepped the sergeant, pistol moving from one target to the next, imprinted into the memory-coils of the auspex moments before and now displayed through his auto-senses. He fired twice at each glowing apparition, moving blindly through the darkness but placing two rounds into every enemy with unwavering accuracy. He could see and hear nothing for several seconds, pacing to the right to fire two bolts into the last of the sensor-targets writ in glowing yellow in his vision.

The blind field collapsed, allowing sight and sound to return with a snap. Auto-senses dimmed the bright lights to a dusky glow to protect Chamell's eyes against the sudden change. He quickly surveyed the room. Eight technicians and guards littered the floor, each with two gaping wounds in their torso. All were dead.

The pulse grenade had been set to its weakest level; just enough to interfere with any automated systems and prevent an alarm signal. As it was, the banks of dials and readouts displaying the feed-through energy of the station were already flickering back into life.

'*Entrance secured*,' reported Senderwat. Strang and Korin followed with news that the lower floors had been cleared of the few men and women on duty.

Fasur joined Chamell.

'Main controls are in here,' said the Shadowmaster. 'The other chamber is secondary cooling systems for the reactors. All of the grid data comes through these consoles.'

'I want every spark of power unleashed across the grid. Overload it,' said Chamell. 'Let there be night.'

TEN

Carandiru
[Day of Vengeance]

Crouched on the ramp of the descending Stormbird, Corax had a perfect view of the unfolding battle for the main city of Carandiru. With the exception of a few buildings containing isolated emergency generators, the city was swathed in darkness. Fiery meteors carved trails against a violet sunset as the remnants of crashing orbital cannons and missile platforms burned up; weapons that had, until the Raven Guard strike, been pointed at the surface rather than into space.

Across the city below, encircled by its kilometre-high wall, las-fire sparkled across streets and rooftops. From several kilometres up it looked like glitter thrown onto a dark pool. Here and there fires raged from more substantial weapons. Soukhounou had done his job well though and such outbreaks were contained; a fire raging through the confines of the prison-city could kill thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. It was impossible to protect everybody and many would die in the uprising, but they were not here to liberate charred corpses.

Around the Stormbird the dark shapes of Whispercutters and Shadowhawks carrying more of Corax's Mor Deythan cut through the darkening sky. The Shadowmasters were splitting up, dropping towards selected targets throughout the conurbation. Further up, Thunderhawks and Stormbirds ploughed down, heading towards outlying work settlements and smaller security facilities – mineheads and mills surrounded by kilometres of razor wire, minefields and defence turrets. Columns of smoke rose from anti-air silos, removed by pinpoint strikes from the Raven Guard fleet in orbit over Carandiru.

There were other groups attacking across the world, targeting supply depots and military barracks, led by Raven Guard veterans but made up from warriors drawn from across the other Legion groups. It was the perfect training ground to teach the Raven Guard method of war. Small attack groups numbering only a few dozen warriors linked up with resistance cells rapidly raised by Soukhounou and existing dissidents.

Two kilometres up, it was time for Corax and the main attack to go their separate ways. The primarch glanced back at Arendi in the Stormbird compartment. The bodyguard lifted a fist in acknowledgement, the gesture duplicated by the legionaries around him.

'Remember, I want the wall guns silenced and secured,' the primarch said over the vox. The reminder was probably unnecessary but as with so many Raven Guard operations timing was paramount. 'Rendezvous in three hours.'

'Good hunting,' Arendi replied.

Unfurling his flight pack wings, Corax jumped off the ramp, a combi-weapon gripped tightly in his right hand.

A thermal immediately caught the primarch, lifting him above the plunging drop-ship. He angled left and down, diving towards the wider streets and squares towards the centre of the city. Even from this height he could see the people thronging the streets, a mass of humanity converging on the fortress-palace that covered a hill in the northern reaches of the city.

There would be casualties. Few worthwhile endeavours could be accomplished without sacrifice, but it was not Corax's desire to see the blood of the oppressed shed needlessly. He would not incite rebellion and then leave others to face the bloody consequences. Taking the city would not be a straightforward task and the people of Carandiru would need help whilst the Raven Guard established control. Corax had assigned himself the duty of staving off the first counter-attacks against the people while the rest of his force secured vital defence points.

Corax had wondered whether the Sons of Horus and other Space Marines would try to quench the uprising with the blood of the non-Legion soldiers acting as guards, but the legionaries left as garrison were responding strongly. Until now the Raven Guard presence had been hidden and the traitors looked as though they were seeking to quell the rebellion before it had established itself, not understanding the full extent of the forces now ranged against them. It made them vulnerable, as the primarch had planned.

Circling a kilometre up, Corax saw a Mastodon troop carrier leaving one of the depots close to the main watch keep. Its appeared to be heading for the central plaza. The Mastodon was capable of carrying forty Space Marines within its hull, slow but well armed and armoured. As a mobile command point it would be ideal for coordinating the suppression of the uprising and, if fortune favoured the primarch, a high-level officer or perhaps even the facility commandant himself might be found within.

The primarch furled his wings and dropped, arrowing towards the city like a black meteor. A few hundred metres up he started to angle towards the Mastodon, opening his wings a little to slow his descent as he soared over the rooftops. Ahead scattered marksmen had taken up positions in garrets and walkways overlooking the advance of the surging populace. The cold-hearted killers were sniping at will, gunning down unarmed civilians in the streets below. Corax adjusted his flight path, curving to the left and right, a flicked wingtip or fist decapitating and disembowelling the exposed guards as he swept past.

The Mastodon's size limited it to the main thoroughfares, making its course easy to predict. Gaining a little more height, Corax turned and came at the armoured carrier from the front, dropping almost to street level.

Small-arms fire sprayed at the primarch as he sped between the buildings towards the slab-sided transport, but approaching from directly in front kept him out of the arc of the main sponson weapons on the Mastodon's flanks.

Through the slit of the driver's position in the jutting front cab, Corax could see eyes widen with surprise as he powered towards the vehicle, seemingly intent on a collision. At the last moment Corax flipped a wing and rolled to his left, passing along the side of the carrier. He fired the melta part of his combi-weapon, ripping through the gun blister of the sponson.

Using his wings as an airbrake, he drove his fingertips between ruptured plates of ceramite and used his momentum to swing up to the top of the vehicle. Wings snapping out of the way, Corax strode to the nearest cupola, manned by a mortal guard in a black-visored helm. Hooking his combi-weapon to his belt, Corax grabbed the man's head and wrenched him from his position. He threw the soldier over the side of the Mastodon, where he crumpled on the rockcrete a few metres below.

Another gunner swung a twin-barrelled heavy bolter in Corax's direction. The primarch dodged left and then right, eluding the salvo of explosive-tipped rounds. A kick flattened the armour plate protecting the

gunner, trapping his arms beneath the bent metal. With an open-handed chop, Corax decapitated the man and then with a return blow severed the arms so that the headless corpse dropped down into the body of the vehicle.

With a hiss of pneumatics, a hatch opened behind Corax. He ripped the twisted metal shield free from the broken cupola weapon and pulled a heavy bolter off its mount, hefting it easily. Three rounds met the first man scrambling out of the hatch, each detonation tearing a chunk out of guts and chest. The second clambered into view, clearly forced out by someone below. Two more heavy bolter shots obliterated his head.

The Mastodon stopped. Corax heard the clang of the assault ramp at the front and moved to stand behind the driver's compartment. A stream of red-uniformed soldiers spilled out of the carrier's innards. He cut them down with bursts from the heavy bolter as they emerged, leaving not one enough time to raise a weapon.

The belt feed of the heavy bolter was almost finished. Corax swung down to the front of the carrier, hanging on with one hand as he fired the remaining three bolts through the driver's slit, rewarded by the wet *crump* of exploding flesh and a shriek of pain cut short.

Throwing the spent weapon aside, the primarch let himself drop onto the assault ramp, landing directly onto another guard, pulverising her into the metal mesh. A mixture of visored faces and fear-filled eyes met Corax as he stepped up to the entrance hatch of the carrier.

'I will make this quick,' Corax promised them, pulling his gun free.

And he did.

When he was done, disappointed that he had not encountered a single legionary, Corax moved to the command console on the upper level of the transport, punching his way through the upper deck to force entry. There was one survivor remaining, gabbling over the vox-link, requesting immediate assistance. Corax lanced a fist through the man's spine, severing it between the shoulders. A flick of the wrist ended the paralysed man's brief horror, tearing out heart and lungs.

Stooping over the comm-net panel, Corax looked for the epicentre of the command channel traffic. There were two locations on the grid – the main citadel and a complex of guard towers and bunkers just outside the south wall. Soukhounou was already in the keep and would soon be supported by the arrival of Arendi and his warriors. The whole insurrection was focused on storming the keep and there was little point in Corax adding his might to that battle. The secondary station intrigued him; it was the centre of a large amount of the strategic data criss-crossing the city and the outer guard stations.

Corax knew that if he was the ruler of a prison world, he would not place his strength in an easily identified city fortress. The compound outside the city seemed the most likely location to find the commandant.

There were no other assets free to storm the compound and Corax was determined that whoever was responsible for running this despicable world would be brought to account. Already the arrival of the Raven Guard would be causing the commandant serious doubts and Corax wanted him captured before he could disappear into the wilderness or perhaps escape into orbit. He had no desire for an extended hunt – his mantra was to attack fast and leave quickly – so the only option appeared to be personal intervention.

'This is Corax to all forces. Secondary facilities detected outside the complex. I am investigating. Expect low resistance. Continue with current objectives, no reinforcement needed.'

Exiting the Mastodon, Corax spread his wings and soared into the sky.

ELEVEN

Carandiru
[DV +1 hour]

‘Sometimes,’ Branne turned to address the Raptors around him, ‘sneaking about isn’t going to help. Sometimes you just have to destroy everything in your way.’

Lieutenant Navar Hef followed his commander off the ramp of the Stormbird, accompanied by the other members of the command squad. More warriors, both twisted and unchanged, ran out of the drop-ships around them, moving into the waist-high grass that covered the wildlands around the fort.

While the much of the Legion was tackling the central citadel complex with typical Raven Guard stealth and misdirection, the Raptors were tasked with eliminating a secondary garrison three hundred kilometres away. With the fall of the capital it was likely that any continued resistance or counter-attack would emanate from the bunkers and forts here at Nadrezes.

It was also the site of the high security detainees, according to intelligence from Commander Soukhounou’s sources. Nobody was quite sure who was being held inside Nadrezes, but unlike the rest of the Carandiru population they were under constant guard, held behind lock and bars.

And that meant Corax was very keen to see them released.

Thunderhawks were still spitting lascannon blasts, battle cannon shells and missiles at the outer ring of fortifications while Stormbirds disgorged nearly five hundred legionaries, accompanied by tanks, transports, fast-attack vehicles and heavy guns. On the flanks of the hills overlooking Nadrezes to the south-east drop pods were falling, bringing another two hundred Raptors right on top of depots and storehouses identified by last-minute orbital scans before the fleet had unleashed its payload of deadly warriors.

Around the Thunderhawks, smaller Storm Eagle gunships laid down curtains of fire with ripples of rocket launches, bombarding pillboxes and hardpoints that punctuated the defensive line. Heavier transport craft lowered what assault vehicles still remained in the Raven Guard armouries, while batteries of Hydra anti-air guns watched the skies and self-propelled cannons moved into position to pound any forces that dared to sally forth. Bunker-busting Vindicator tanks rolled forwards at the head of the assault, the massive barrels of their guns belching fire and destruction.

‘Curious thing,’ said Branne as he clambered into the compartment of a waiting Land Raider, Hef close on his heel. ‘Nearly half the emplacements around the fort are facing *inwards*. What do you make of that?’

‘They are afraid of whoever is inside, and want to keep them there,’ replied Hef. He spoke slowly and

surely, negotiating the words with thick tongue and bulging fangs. It had been a while since he could wear a helm, though the armoury had done a fine job of modifying parts from old Mark II and III warplate to fashion a suit of armour to fit the lieutenant's hugely muscled form and bent spine. 'And so we should help them get out.'

'Just so,' said Branne. He spoke to the driver over the internal vox and the assault tank lurched into motion, ploughing across the wildlands towards the outer perimeter of Nadrezes. Around them the column formed – more Land Raiders and Ulysses-class ram vehicles, Predator tanks and Rhino troop carriers ready to smash through into the heart of the enemy positions.

'Lock up!' Branne snapped.

With the others, Nef backed into his holding space and activated the impact suppression systems. Locking bolts dropped down, intersecting with his backpack, while a grip rod descended in front of him. He curled clawed fingers around the bar.

'Fifty seconds to breach.' The commander looked around to check everybody was secure before fixing himself into the forward support harness.

Hef looked at his fellow Raptors, eight of them. Some were deformed like him, three of them untouched by the mutagenic corruption that had bedevilled the company's first and last raising. The Land Raider hit a slope and he felt the vehicle rising for a moment before crashing down, jarring them in their harnesses.

'Trenchline crossed,' Branne told them, head turned towards the strategic display.

Hef looked at Devor across the compartment from him. Friends since being taken as novitiates, he now barely recognised his comrade. Devor's skin had slowly sloughed away, leaving bared fat and muscle. It did not hurt, apparently, but through the red meat and tracery of veins jutted contorted bone – three tusks either side of the jaw. The Apothecarion removed them but fresh ones kept growing. He was due for more surgery soon. Unlike Hef, Devor's body was not too bad, save for growths on his elbows that he had to file down every few days with a las-rasp.

Neroka, another lifelong friend, was completely different, untouched. He wore the Mark VI that had become the hallmark of the original Raptors, boltgun held across his chest, standing straight and proud in the embrace of the suppression bars. The Raptor caught Hef looking at him.

'Time for some righteous violence, lieutenant. There are plenty of traitors need killing.'

'Certainly are,' replied Hef. He flicked a look at Branne, who was talking curtly over the vox-link, still monitoring the ongoing attack. 'Time to show our worth again.'

'You can count on it.' Hef could hear the smile in Neroka's words. 'There's nothing that can stop us.'

'Breach in ten… nine… eight…'

Hef tried to stay relaxed as Branne continued the countdown. He could hear the boom of gunship strikes through the hull, very close. They were tearing a path through the defences for the assault column to follow, the Land Raiders at the head of the attack.

The assault tank came to a sudden halt, hull reverberating with an impact. The harnesses were firing back into the hull even as the ramp dropped. Hef was the first out, closest to the exit. He pulled free a chainsword with his right hand and started the motor, razor-sharp teeth spinning with a roar. His other hand readied a frag grenade – fingers too thick and clumsy now to operate the trigger of a bolter or pistol.

The Land Raider had crashed through the wall of an outbuilding, almost flattening the entire structure. Hef sprinted down the ramp and tossed the grenade ahead, the blast filling the room with smoke and shrapnel. Something moved towards him through the dust and he struck out, slamming the whirring teeth of the chainsword into the side of a man's head as he stumbled out of the gloom. The chainsword bit through the helm and sheared off the top of his would-be attacker's skull in one swipe.

The crack of bolts and flare of propellant accompanied Hef as he pushed on. He had no helm display but

he knew that his battle-brothers were with him, to each side, the smell of their armour and the whine of servos as clear to his augmented senses of smell and hearing as any transponder return.

More guards waited, wearing a hexagonal mesh like ancient chainmail over black bodysuits. They were armed with rapid-firing autoguns, spewing bullets at the incoming legionaries without much discipline or accuracy. Hef felt something graze the side of his head as he charged. Bolts sparked past him into the defenders, tearing away chunks of flesh and sending glittering, broken scales showering into the air.

Up close the garrison soldiers stood no chance. Hef ripped the face from one with his claws. His chainsword took the leg from another a moment later. A woman with a power sword lunged at him, some kind of squad leader – he saw the glowing blade spearing towards his chest and stepped aside. He snatched hold of the woman's wrist, splintering fragile bones inside her heavy glove; a twist broke more and dislocated the limb. Shrieking she pulled up her pistol to jam it into Hef's face. He lashed out with the chainsword, and both pistol and hand clattered to the floor.

Alarms blared and red lights flashed overhead as Hef drove the tip of the chainsword up through the woman's abdomen and into her ribcage. Shredded gore splashed from the wound as he ripped the weapon free to let the twitching corpse drop from his grasp.

The fighting was dying down; only two or three of the guards were left, the other Raptors taking them out with knife and bolter in short order. Hef looked around for Branne and spied the commander bending over a low console of viewscreens and controls.

'Gate access,' said Branne, punching a series of buttons. 'Everything has been opened. That should make progress swifter.'

Branne led the squad out onto the flat ferrocrete apron of the main complex. The sun was bright in the mid-morning, barely a cloud in the air except for the smoke streaming from fires started by the attack. The sky had a turquoise cast to it, criss-crossed by the contrails of circling aircraft and the haze of plasma exhaust.

'Main complex is open, commander,' said Neroka, pointing to a pair of Predators that had forged past the Land Raiders. They were still blasting away at a gatehouse that led down into levels below the ground.

'Force One, converge on my position for assault. Force Two to maintain perimeter. Force Three, break into squads and start clearing the rest of the complex.' Branne broke into a trot as he headed towards the smashed remains of the gatehouse. 'Time to find out who they've been hiding.'

TWELVE

Carandiru
[DV +90 minutes]

The Legiones Astartes had conquered the galaxy. It was an irrefutable fact. During the Great Crusade countless worlds had been brought to compliance in the name of the Emperor by the Legions. Looking down at the teeming horde of poorly-armed prisoners hurling themselves at the gates and windows of the inner citadel, Soukhounou considered the oft-quoted codicil to this statement. The Legiones Astartes had conquered the galaxy but it was the unnumbered millions of the Imperial Army and the adepts of Terra coming in their wake that had *kept* it.

A noise in the auditorium caused him to turn. It was Fajallo, one of the cell leaders, who had been a servant in the citadel and provider of most of Soukhounou's intelligence. The lad was only seventeen years Terran-standard but had sharp eyes and sharper wits. It was a shame that he was just a little too old for geneseed implantation by the Legion's new, more rigorous standards. He was lithe and strong and, providing there were no hidden genetic abnormalities, would have made a fine legionary. As it was, he was a fine commando leader instead.

'The gate is not open yet,' Soukhounou said, gesturing for the youth to join him on the balcony. 'Dozens are dying needlessly.'

'Not a problem,' said Fajallo, confident but not cocky. 'It took a few minutes longer than we planned to get into the basement weapon lockers. Kasslar and his team have the guards pinned down in the forum. Castillin is at the gate mechanism now.'

Soukhounou accepted this with a nod. He studied the boy and wondered what Branne, Agapito and the others had been like during the liberation of Deliverance. It was an experience he could never share with them, but he did not feel any less a Raven Guard because of it; no more than they felt inferior because they had not taken part in the Great Crusade campaigns before the rediscovery of the primarch.

'I'm amazed that you managed to pull all of this together in twenty days,' said Fajallo, looking over the parapet. He glanced back at Soukhounou with awe. 'I thought it impossible.'

'I disagree,' the Space Marine replied. 'If you had thought it impossible you would not have listened to me. You thought it improbable.'

'Same difference,' Fajallo said with a shrug. A bruise was darkening on his cheek, obscuring the freckles. 'I was desperate, nothing else.'

'The desperate have nothing else but hope.' Soukhounou waved a hand at the trammelled masses now

venting their rage against their former captors. ‘It is said that when one has reached the bottom the only way to continue is up. In my experience it often needs someone else to show that it is possible to climb.’

‘What I don’t understand is why you didn’t just come in and attack straight away,’ said the youth. He looked up, as if to see the battle-barges, cruisers and destroyers of the fleet in orbit. ‘Just blast everything to pieces with your starships and then drop onto the survivors. Why just send in a lone legionary? I mean, no offence or anything.’

‘A reasonable question, and no offence taken. What happens here is a message. A message to those that turned against the Emperor. They do not have the support of mankind. Such allies as they have are bartered with threats and bribery, not fashioned out of true loyalty to their cause. If a single legionary can raise rebellion here, it can happen anywhere.

‘A single legionary *can* conquer a world, just as a relative handful – perhaps a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty – kept Carandiru under the boot of oppression. Just as hope is my weapon, the hope of victory and freedom, so fear can cow an entire population. Fear of reprisal against self and family. Fear of failure, to lose even more. The tyrant will persuade the slave that they have even more to lose when they have nothing but dirt and rags, persuading them that dirt and rags are something worth protecting.

‘And they divide the people, turning them against each other. A hundred and fifty legionaries is a potent force, but not on any world could they physically suppress a billion people. No, it took others to do that, willing to trade their own kind for the smallest privilege, to be free of lash and drudgery themselves. That is how the dictator grasps an entire world, a whole star system. He takes it in his fist and crushes it for everything it is worth. Offer rewards to the few, empower them, and they will destroy the will of the many.’

The thought was making Soukhounou angry. Though he had not been born on Deliverance, had not fought against the tyrannical tech-guilds of Kiavahr, he had still accepted wholeheartedly the axioms and philosophy of Corax. If it had not been the purpose of the Legiones Astartes to bring freedom to the galaxy, if war and butchery on an unimaginable scale had no greater cause than domination, then everything he had fought for was pointless.

‘It does not even have to be a legionary. It requires one man or woman, nothing more. The first to risk everything for an ideal. They put their life on the line, their whole future for a cause in the hope of being an example. And then there is someone even braver. The person that chooses to step up next to them. One man or woman is an individual, fighting for themselves. Two is a cause.’

‘That makes me braver than you, doesn’t it?’ Fajallo said with a grin. ‘If you were the first and it’s braver to be second.’

‘Technically, I had recruited several hundred followers before I approached you,’ said the Space Marine. He saw the youth’s expression turn crestfallen, and laid a hand on Fajallo’s shoulder. ‘But you did not know that at the time. From your perspective you were the first – or the second I suppose – and yes, what you did took more bravery and was harder than anything I have ever done in my long life.’

A loud detonation rang out across the square as an explosion tore out part of the wall above the gates. The crowd surged away as metal and stone showered down onto the plaza. From windows below, rebel fighters bellowed to the people that the gates were unbarred. Cheers and fierce cries greeted the announcement and the downtrodden of Carandiru came on again with renewed vigour.

‘You need to start the next phase,’ Soukhounou told his companion. ‘Time to get to those charges we rigged under the secondary wall.’

Fajallo swiped a casual salute and darted off, leaving Soukhounou to scour the skies above the square for a sign of a Stormbird – Arendi and his small group were supposed to be supporting the battle for the citadel.

But there was no sign of them, and even with the advantage of numbers it was not certain that the inmates of Carandiru would overpower their foes.

Disappointed, Soukhounou moved off the balcony and started back to the stairwell. He would have to trust to Fajallo to lead the attack through the breach of the secondary wall so that the commander could lend his might to the battle raging a few storeys below. He was only one legionary and more would die because of Arendi's absence.

He would have words for the former commander when the two of them next met.

THIRTEEN

Carandiru
[DV +2 hours]

The Raptors advanced with purpose along the broad tunnel, alert for any danger. Hef marched alongside his commander, amazed and horrified by what they found. The underground chambers they passed were fronted by flickering power fields and beyond the force walls lurked all manner of creatures.

The rooms were decked out like cells, with bunks and ablution facilities, but most looked more like animal lairs, containing piles of shredded blankets and soiled sheets. The inhabitants capered and slithered and stalked around their cages, some throwing themselves at the energy barriers as the Space Marines passed, each attempt met with a crack and a blast of purplish light.

No sound passed the power fields, leaving Hef to wonder what howls, yammers and screeches resounded beyond them. Many of the inmates were obviously furious, some sobbing. A few approached the legionaries with suspicious or hopeful eyes, all too human amongst distorted, canine faces and scaled skin.

It was soon obvious why the main controls had not operated the wards in this part of the prison. Some of the creatures they passed were hulking beasts as large as Dreadnoughts, twisted with outlandish muscle and sprouting tendons and veins. They hunched in their cells with horns and tusks and sword-like claws. Furrows carved into the walls and ceilings stood testament to long frustration. Some of the mutants picked up the remnants of their furnishings and hurled them at the barriers as the legionaries passed; beat fists on their chests like base primates or put back their heads and let loose silenced howls.

Each new apparition made Hef shudder with recognition, as though he was looking at the chambers beneath Ravendelve where he and the Raptors had been kept until the Horus sympathisers had attacked. He tried so hard to push the memories back, to focus on the mission at hand, but as each new leering monstrosity and anguished wretch was revealed he could not think of anything else.

'We will avenge them,' Branne said, sensing the unease of his warriors.

It seemed an odd thing to say, given the nature of many of the warriors that accompanied the commander. Other than armaments, battleplate and livery, the only difference between some of the Raptors and the prisoners was which side of the force wall they were on. If these poor unfortunates had to be avenged, what did that mean for the Raptors?

A burst of gunfire from ahead brought welcome distraction from the unsettling train of thought. Hef bounded forwards as a squad of Raptors broke through into another part of the complex with melta

bombs, and met by a storm of bullets and heavier weapons fire.

Racing along the freshly opened tunnel, Hef glimpsed fur and horns and scaly skin, but paid each new horror no heed, and with the others he burst from the front line of Raven Guard. His arms had grown longer in the last months, part of the continuing process that had stretched bones and cartilage and bolstered muscle and organs, and he almost raced on all fours in his desire to get at the foe.

He bounded past bodies of the guards, some of them oddly mangled, twisted and broken like dolls where they had been discarded. He noticed in passing no bolter wounds or blade cuts on the bodies; they had all been butchered by hand.

A missile detonated just ahead, smashing a Raptor from his feet in the blast, ripping another in half. The fire coming from up ahead was more accurate than before, shots pounding into the chests of the power-armoured legionaries while las-bolts flickered from the doorways with surprising vehemence.

Turning a corner, Hef came face to face with a giant of a man, as tall as a Space Marine and just as broad. He was half-naked, chest bulging with scarred muscle. Hef struck with his chainsword out of instinct, but the warrior moved just as quickly, ducking the blow and driving a fist into the lieutenant's gut. Another punch crashed into Hef's jaw, sending him reeling backwards. A bolt-round slammed into his attacker's shoulder, tearing out a fist-sized chunk of flesh. It did little to stop the man as he lunged after Hef, who was retreating back to the corner of the passageway while more of his kin advanced in support of the attack.

'Cease firing!' Branne's bellow rang along the metal-lined corridor. 'Fall back! Cease fire!'

Hef could not understand why they would not press the advantage but he followed orders without hesitation, stumbling away from his adversary as the man stooped to pick up the chainsword knocked from Hef's grasp. The Raven Guard could not even remember dropping the weapon, and shame burned as he retreated.

Sporadic fire covered the Raven Guard retreat as the Raptors regrouped in a central passageway.

'What is the First Axiom of Victory?' Branne shouted, standing at the junction.

Hef was starting to recover his senses from the bloodlust and confusion. The Raptors formed up around their commander to either side of the side-tunnel. Branne stood with his back to the wall.

'Be where the enemy desires you not to be,' a reply echoed back.

'This is Commander Branne of the Raven Guard, identify yourselves!'

'Branne?' There was distant muttering that Hef could not quite make out. 'Show yourself!'

The commander glanced at Hef and the others. He considered the demand for a few seconds, frowning with indecision. Eventually he poked his head around the corner as the warriors on the other side of the corridor eased their weapons into firing positions.

'Branne! By the pits of Kiavahr, it bloody well is!' came the other voice.

The commander stepped out into the open, lowering his weapons.

'Napenna? I'll be a tech-priest's mother! What… How…'

Hef saw now that his foe was not one of the guards but actually another Space Marine, as were the handful of others that had defended the side corridor. Two were lying dead on the ground, another one nursing a badly bleeding arm. There were two unmoving Raptors amongst them.

The one called Napenna slapped a hand to Branne's chest. A strand of long blond hair stuck to his sweaty face but Hef could see a tattoo on the warrior's cheek, of the Legion's raven emblem gripping the cog of the Mechanicum.

A Techmarine.

Napenna stepped back, brow furrowing as he looked at the gathering Raptors. His men closed in, captured lasguns and autoguns looking small in their giant fists. All were dressed only in loose leggings,

barefoot and bare chested.

'It seems I am not the only one with an explanation to give,' said the prisoner. 'How long have you been here? Why did you not release us sooner?'

'I am not sure I get your meaning, friend,' said Branne.

'You released and armed the subs before you found us?' Napenna waved a hand at Hef and a few of the other mutated warriors. 'When did you arrive?'

'Not more than thirty minutes ago.' Branne glanced at his companions. 'These are my Raptors, Napenna. From the Legion.'

'They look just like the subs,' said one of the other prisoners.

'Subs?' asked Hef. 'What are subs?'

The other legionary looked uneasy for a moment.

'It's what we call the ones that have been experimented on,' he explained. 'The ones they turned into…'

'Subs? Subhumans?' Hef felt like he had been struck, a knot of pain in his chest. Anger flared at the insult but he fought back the urge to lash out.

He was not a beast, he told himself, but he could not imagine what the Raptors must look like to an outsider. Mustering what dignity he could, Hef brought his fist up to his chest in salute. 'I am Lieutenant Navar Hef of the Raven Guard. You are?'

'Iaento, Blood Angels,' said the other warrior. He did not return the salute, but looked at Napenna. 'You never mentioned these… warriors before.'

'Never seen them,' said Napenna. He looked at the commander and Raptors with suspicion.

'A lot has changed,' said Branne. 'Why did you attack us?'

'When the cells were opened I figured out that there was an attack and mustered the few of us left,' said Napenna. 'I thought the commandant had sent in a squad of su– of his *experiments* to kill us before we could be freed.'

'Could you not see we were Raven Guard?' asked Branne. There were mutters from a couple of the other legionaries and a harsh bark of a laugh from Iaento. 'What? What is it?'

'Your colours are not the badge of loyalty they once were,' said the Blood Angel. He looked at Hef and then at the chainsword he had taken. With a shrug of apology Iaento handed back the weapon. 'I think this is yours.'

'If the Legion is here, where is Lord Corax?' Napenna said with some urgency.

'He is going to take down the planetary commandant,' replied Branne. 'Why?'

'I think Lord Corax is heading right into a trap.' Napenna looked pained. 'The commandant was one of us, until Isstvan. A Raven Guard.'

FOURTEEN

Carandiru
[DV +2 hours]

The commandant's compound was not without serious defences. A flurry of ground-fired missiles greeted Corax a few kilometres out. He saw them coming and destroyed most with bursts of long-range bolter fire as he closed on his objective. The last came at him from below and detonated on proximity, sending shrapnel into the primarch's armour but causing no serious harm.

From the obscuring cloud above the expanse of armoured towers and turret-protected bulwark two interceptors descended to meet the incoming primarch. Corax could not match the jets for sheer speed or firepower and his armour wailed a cacophony of warnings as missile locks and targeting arrays latched onto his presence.

The flare of missile launches forced the primarch to descend, watching the contrails of two incoming projectiles. He had only a few seconds to react, plummeting as fast as he could towards ground level where the augurs of the fighters might lose him against the backwash of signal from the surface. The missiles jinked with him, steering with long vanes, but though he could not outpace them Corax was not without his own advantages.

He almost stopped in mid-air with a thrust from his flight pack, dipping a shoulder to drop like a stone, swiftly enough that the first missile passed over him without detonating. He could only spare a glance as it raced on, faster than the speed of sound; the other missile was still heading in his direction. He tried ascending, boosting himself up under gravity pressures that would have broken even a Space Marine, but it was too late.

The missile detonated about ten metres to Corax's left, showering high explosive and shards over the primarch. The worst pattered off his armour but the complex metal primaries of his flight pack suffered damage, causing him to shed slender shining feather-blades in his wake.

The interceptors were closing still as more anti-air fire from the ground sprang up from defence turrets, lancing around the primarch with blasts of deadly las and explosive shells. Even if he could land in the teeth of the turrets' fire, he would be an easy target for the ordnance of the jet fighters. Corax had to destroy them before he could take the fight to the ground. The primarch boosted himself towards the oncoming aircraft, accelerating hard, almost breaching the sound barrier himself, his armour vibrating all over as he pushed his battleplate to its limits.

Arms back, wings rigid, head set, he powered up to meet the aircraft as two more missiles detached and

raced towards him. There was nothing to do but weather their bursts, making minute adjustments of position to bank away at the last moment so that the greater part of the blasts erupted against chest and shoulder rather than flight pack.

The pilots switched to the rotary cannons within the blunt noses of their planes, slowing to draw jagged lines of tracer fire across the primarch's path. Armour-piercing rounds slammed into the ceramite and plasteel encasing him, sending shards of broken material shimmering into the air. He could feel wounds along his left arm and leg like pinpricks – stinging but not threatening.

The pilot of the closest interceptor tried to pull up, realising the primarch's intent, but the plane was not as manoeuvrable as Corax's flight pack – he thrust a fist in front of him as he slammed through the port wing. Fuel tanks erupted as he burst out above the plane. The pilot's face beneath his goggles was a mask of horror as he looked back at the ascending primarch while his craft stalled into a terminal spin.

The other fighter came past on a raking run, cannon spewing shells, the salvo flying wide of the mark. Killing the power to his pack for a moment, Corax turned sharply, firing the gravitic repulsors again to turn the climb into a dive, streaking after the second aircraft.

The pilot had lost sight of his target and was turning hard, brakes flaring along the wings as he tried to bring his craft around to find his prey. Corax judged his swooping pass perfectly, outstretched fingers ripping open the cockpit canopy and tearing through harness and flight suit.

The man simply fell out of the banking interceptor, his screams lost on the wind.

With the two aircraft destroyed, the ground fire returned with a vengeance, blanketing the sky with airbursts and flashes of laser. Corax jinked and wove his way between them but the weight of fire was too much to avoid entirely. Fragments richocheting from armour plate scorched by the zip of energy beams.

Corax slowed a fraction to assess the target. The greatest concentration of communications aerials and sensor dishes was on a multi-building structure at the heart of the compound. He steered towards this, deducing it to be the nerve centre of the complex.

If the commandant was anywhere, it would be there.

Quad-cannons boomed out a welcome as he descended, forcing Corax to take a wider route to his target. He landed atop one of the outer defence emplacements, crashing through the ferrocrete roof, crushing men and gun breech alike in the collapsing debris. On the ground, he broke into a run, sprinting across to the next emplacement even as its heavy cannon moved in his direction on a whining turntable. Two blasts from his melta turned the breech to slag. An explosive bolt slammed the gunner, now missing an arm, out of his seat beside the cannon.

Corax sprinted on, heedless of the pistol and rifle fire from other guards pinging from his backpack. The headquarters building consisted of a central tower a few storeys in height, joined by thick-armoured walkways to four outlying bunkers. Razor wire and metal stakes proved no obstacle as the primarch leapt over the intervening barrier with long strides, not even needing the assistance of his flight pack.

A segmented gate like that of an armoury garage started to roll open on the bunker to his left, revealing blocky, armoured figures. At first he thought they were warriors in Terminator armour, but they were bigger still. Dreadnoughts was his second guess, but the trio of warriors that emerged were hulking brutes in plates of armour rather than full war machines.

Plasma erupted from the guns of the closest, searing past Corax's face. Turning to face the oncoming warriors he heard another of the bunkers opening and glanced back, to see two more of the gigantic soldiers coming at him from the opposite direction.

Rather than be surrounded, he bounded towards the group of three. Secondary guns – bolter systems operated by their own cogitators, he assumed – spat rounds at him while the brutes lifted their arms, bearing whirling blades, crackling fists and guns of unconventional design.

They reminded him of the Chaos walkers on Iapetus, but these suits bore none of the arcane runework that had marked the bodies of the half-daemon machines created by Azor and Delvere. They were clearly battleplate rather than automated machines – he could see muscle moving beneath meshwork linking segmented ceramite and adamantium plates. Rage-filled eyes glared at him behind smoky-grey visors as the traitor creatures broke into lumbering runs to meet his charge.

A fork of lightning erupted from the golden tip of one gun, catching Corax's left arm. The energy crawled up the limb, seemingly growing in strength, feeding off the power circuits of the primarch's armour. His arm became leaden as internal systems shut down. It felt as though heavy weights had suddenly been strapped to his side, causing him to stumble. With some effort he ran on, left arm hanging uselessly at his side, the combi-weapon in his right hand.

He fired. The flurry of bolts sparked from the armour of the closest enemy, cracking ceramite but having little effect on the creature within. The primarch was still out of effective range with the melta and he increased his speed, pounding across the dirt-spattered rockcrete.

A boom and a whine alerted him to a shot from behind; a moment later his right leg buckled as a flickering shell slammed into the back of his thigh, punching neatly through armour and into flesh. He toppled, hand outstretched to prevent himself falling face first into the rockcrete as another boom and crack heralded a second shot. Splinters of flight pack vanes sailed over his shoulder from the impact.

He looked down at his leg, bemused that any weapon could hit so hard. In the past his warplate had been proof against missiles, lascannons, autocannons and even plasma. Unnatural energy wreathed the small hole, glowing with dark fire.

Sorcery!

He heaved himself up, noting that some sensation was starting to return to his left arm as systems recovered from the shock of the lightning hit. The warrior's weapon was almost recharged though; Corax could see arcs of energy coiling around the jutting fins that surrounded the main body of the gun.

A burst of plasma splashed over his left shoulder, showering molten droplets of metal and ceramite across his helm. Corax heard the crack of the sorcerous rifle from behind him, and gritted his teeth as he expected another piercing blow.

But the shell whined past overhead.

With a wordless shout, fuelled by genuine concern giving rise to a boiling anger, Corax hurled himself at the trio of warriors in front of him. He fired the melta into the chest of the plasma-armed warrior, slamming the traitor to the ground.

Before he could finish off his downed adversary, a chainblade skittered across the primarch's left arm, carving ragged grooves with whirring teeth. Corax flailed, slashing his fingers towards his attacker's face. The blow went wide and the chain-weapon screeched down again, striking sparks from the seal of his outstretched elbow.

Corax hooked his gun and smashed a fist down into the fallen traitor. As he pulled his hand free, a thick oil-like gunge oozed from the wound but no blood. He did not have time to consider the implications of this as a third traitor joined the fight, bodily slamming into the primarch, a clawed power fist grabbing hold of his chest plastron as they skidded a dozen metres across the hard ground.

Corax rolled as they slowed amidst a pile of rocky debris, twisting to slam the traitor into the rucked ground. Armour cracked under an impact that would have shattered natural bones and pulverised the internal organs of a mortal man. The augmented traitor glared at him through his visor, demented rage in his eyes. The warrior jabbed a short-hand punch into the side of Corax's helm, slamming his head sideways. Another ringing blow from the other traitor's chain-weapon sent shards of cracking ceramite spraying from the primarch's shoulder guard. The primarch was surprised that his other attacker had been

able to follow him so swiftly.

Corax lashed out wildly, throwing back the traitor with the chainblade. Rising to his feet, he stomped on the helm of the power fist armed warrior, crushing his head to a pulp of blood and flattened metal. The body twitched twice and then fell still. The traitor who had been punched in the chest was slowly pushing himself to his feet. Taking a step towards him, shaking his head with amazement, Corax drew up his gun and levelled the melta for a shot.

The other warrior fired his lightning gun again, sending black energy coruscating up Corax's chest. He fell backwards, all but paralysed between neck and waist. His hearts hammered in his chest, overloaded with energy, but the systems of his plate were going haywire, sending erratic signals to arms and legs, causing spasms that fought against the primarch's muscles rather than boosted them.

The boom of the heavy rifle caused Corax to wince in the moment before another projectile slammed into the gap between left pauldron and neck, tearing into the muscle of his shoulder. For the first time since Isstvan, Corax let out a shout of pain, wrenched from him as the sorcerous fire of the shell burnt into his flesh, seeping its warp taint into blood and tissue.

Something heavy pinned down his left arm and he looked up to see the chainblade-warrior with a massive boot on the primarch's wrist. Normally he would have been able to cast the traitor aside with little effort, as large as he was, but his armour was not responding. There was triumph in the brute's eyes as he pointed the crackling muzzle of his lightning gun at Corax's face.

The others gathered around him, the one with the rifle also sporting a barbed powerblade that glittered with sparks of silver energy. The last warrior had no ranged weapon that Corax could see except for a pivoting set of twin bolters mounted on his shoulder; both arms ended in spiked hammerheads surrounded by a pulsating dark aura.

Silhouetted against the sky, the four massive warriors loomed over Corax, weapons at the ready. It seemed impossible. He had been ready to face his death at the beast Angron's hands in the mountains of Isstvan V, but to die like this? It seemed ludicrous. He did not even know the manner of soldiers that had defeated him.

It had not been difficult and Corax felt the failure like a gash in his gut.

Another point-blank blast from the lightning gun sent shocks pulsing through his armour systems, keeping the primarch immobile. One of the soldiers stood aside, allowing Corax to see a group of figures gathering on a rampart atop the bunker ahead. There were four more individuals there, garbed in Legiones Astartes armour, two with the markings of the Emperor's Children, another in Sons of Horus livery.

The fourth stepped out from the others and stood looking down over the wall edging the fortification. His warplate was black, and on the shoulder was the unmistakable sigil of a white raven. He wore no helm, pale hair hanging lankly across his features.

A warrior of the Raven Guard.

'You made it too easy!' the warrior called down and immediately Corax recognised the voice along with the face.

'Nathian.'

Corvus was half as tall again as the youths around him, and broader by far, but of all those who had met the guerrilla leader Nathian showed almost no fear. The prisoner's stare matched Corax's in its intensity.

'That's the boon I bring, ain't it?' said Nathian. 'They think I can be trusted. I run the largest smuggling ring on the wing. A few bribes and words here and there will make it a lot easier for you to be moving stuff around, I'd warrant. And I'm no shirker in a fight. I'm dishonest, but I give you my

word, for what it's worth. I want out of this stinking hole as much as any of this lot.'

'He knows too much already – a curse on him and his prying,' said Agapito. 'Let's be rid of him. We'll put the body in the incinerators next shift.'

Nathian sneered, but did not look afraid.

'No,' said Corvus. He looked at Nathian closely, and saw the feral danger behind his eyes. A multiple-killer, aged only thirteen. It was not pleasant, but what Corvus had planned would sometimes need men of cold disposition, not just courage. 'I can use him. Yes, Nathian – I accept your oath. And make no mistake, I will hold you to it.'

'Well met, Lord Corax,' the former Raven Guard sneered. The wind tousled white hair across his thin face. 'You forgot the First Axiom of Stealth, brave leader. You came to me, exactly where I thought you would be.'

Corax tried to sit up. A sparking hammer smashed into his face, knocking him back. The lightning cannon crackled just a few metres away, ready to paralyse his armour with another blast the moment he tried to get free. There was satisfaction and monstrous intent in the eyes of the warrior holding it.

'Of course, getting you here was the easy part, I suppose,' Nathian continued. His voice was rasping, filled with bitterness. He glanced at the Emperor's Children legionary. 'Using some of the superior gene-serums from... Well, I won't bore you with the details. These are the "New Men", as Fabius called them. He's an Apothecary, you know. Very clever.' He waved a hand towards the hulking warriors. 'I think the name's a little understated, though. The aborted failures in the cells aside, they are far more than men now, aren't they? We all are. "*Legiones Superior*", maybe? I don't know, I was never the best with words. I left that sort of thing to Agapito. He has the poet's soul. Anyway, they don't really have a name yet, so I'm afraid you'll die in ignorance.'

Nathian walked away. Corax noticed a slight limp as the traitor Raven Guard disappeared back into the bunker. Around the primarch, the so-called New Men stepped forwards, raising their weapons.

'Time to find out how well the Emperor really made you,' said one of them, his bass voice modulated by the augmitter systems of his armour.

He fired a shot through Corax's left forearm. The primarch gritted his teeth, not permitting himself even a snarl; the traitors would be granted no additional pleasure by his cries of pain.

'Perhaps he needed to make you a little tougher,' the warrior sneered.

Corax surged up, leaping towards him. He was a step away from grabbing the traitor around the throat when searing pain crashed through his skull. As agony flared along his neural pathways and down his spine he realised that a fresh lightning blast had struck him in the head.

His nervous system failed him, plunging him face first into the gravel-strewn rockcrete. It took all of his effort to raise himself up, pushing with his left arm, ignoring the ache that throbbed down to his wrist.

A plasma blast smashed into his back, flattening the primarch with its detonation, melting the carefully forged feathers of his wings. Feedback from his armour blared warnings as coolants raced through the systems to stop the heat spreading further.

He was almost blind with the shock of the electrical hit and burning pain, barely able to focus on the ground just in front of him. Corax took in a shuddering breath, determined he would die on his feet, not on his face.

Another round smashed into his knee, cracking cartilage. He could not stop the cry that escaped from his lips. With a herculean effort he managed to flop over onto his back, wings closing beneath him.

He wasn't sure what happened next. One moment the warrior with the lightning cannon was stepping forward, chainblade raised with teeth whirring. An instant later he became a ball of fire and metal

splinters, hurled bodily away by the explosion, an arm spinning off across the ground.

The roar of jets dragged Corax's eyes skyward and he looked up to see five black shapes plunging down from above, jump packs flaring.

The New Men reacted fast, turning their weapons on the incoming legionaries. A plasma bolt seared wide of its target but the traitor with the anti-tank gun found his mark, putting a round through the head of an incoming Raven Guard, turning helm and skull to a trailing mess of bone and blood.

The lead warrior landed on the hammer-handed soldier, plasma pistol vaporising the creature's face a second before the Raven Guard crashed feet first into its chest, cracking open armour and sending both spilling to the ground.

The other New Men rushed to the attack as more shapes with jump packs landed, the headless corpse of the last crashing to the ferrocrete a few metres away. Missiles and battle cannon fire from their wheeling dropship pounded the bunkers, secondary weapons stitching smaller detonations across the armour of the New Men while fire from the encircling emplacements tore past and crashed against the Stormbird's armoured fuselage.

The shock of the lightning blast was wearing off. Corax could feel sensation returning to his hands and feet. The Raven Guard fell as a pack onto their next target, hacking with power axes and blades, blasting with their pistols to drive the soldier away from their primarch.

Corax saw the plasma gunner turning his weapon on the black-armoured legionaries, recognising the glow of a fully charged weapon. With a snarl he forced himself from the ground and took a running leap, damaged flight pack flaring, slamming awkwardly shoulder first into the giant warrior. The plasma blast rocketed into the sky and the primarch followed it, his wings snapping out to carry them both up past the Stormbird, which was turning its weapons to the perimeter defences.

The comm crackled in Corax's ear.

'*Lord Corax! This is Branne. The commandant's compound is a trap!*'

'Thank you for the warning, commander,' Corax replied through gritted teeth.

The New Man had a grip on one of Corax's wings but the primarch extended both arms, prising away his enemy's grasp. Inverting quickly, he threw the mutated warrior groundwards and pitched after him. The New Man's impact threw up a cloud of dust and grit into which Corax dived without hesitation, slamming fist first into the brute, the blow carving through plate and into bone, splitting the augmented soldier from shoulder to gut.

'*Shall I send reinforcements, my lord?*' Branne sounded desperately worried.

'No,' Corax replied. He looked around. Two of the New Men were still alive, battling with the Raven Guard. The primarch ran towards the melee. 'Maintain current missions.'

The New Man with the sorcerous rifle heard the incoming primarch and turned, raising his weapon. Now fully focused Corax saw the flash of the muzzle and the dark blur of the armour-piercing round coming towards him. Still accelerating, he swayed to his left, letting the projectile pass harmlessly over his right shoulder.

The traitor took a step back and hurriedly worked the breech mechanism of the heavy rifle. He chambered another round and lifted the weapon to his shoulder just as Corax reached him.

The primarch's uppercut caught the New Man square under the helm, lifting him from his feet as his head snapped back, dark filth erupting as Corax's fist parted metal and bone like air. He shouldered aside the flailing body as momentum carried the primarch into the last attacker.

The final New Man had the helm of one of the Raven Guard in an iron grip, ceramite cracking crazily and reinforced plate buckling under the pressure. The legionaries blazed with bolt pistols and hacked with their chainswords, futilely battering at the armoured behemoth.

Corax turned and landed feet first, snapping through both arms with mighty blows from his gauntlets, leaving the Raven Guard to topple backwards as the New Man stumbled away. A bestial half-roar, half-scream bellowed from the mutilated warrior's vocalisers as he waved the stumps of his limbs helplessly, black gore splashing to the ground.

Another kick sent him reeling back still further. Corax boosted his next step, leaping up half a dozen metres before crashing down upon the inhuman warrior. Fuelled by the realisation of how close he had come to dying, Corax let his emotions flow, tearing and shredding, fists a blur as he reduced armour to fragments, skin to strips and flesh to tatters.

When he was done he stepped back. The New Man had been turned into a ruin of congealing black fluid and severed limbs, scattered about with pieces of ceramite and plasteel.

Breathing heavily, Corax turned to his warriors, who were now exchanging fire with human soldiers racing out onto the top of the bunkers.

The legionaries' leader dragged off his dented helm and took in a ragged breath.

It was Arendi.

'Gherith? Why are you here?' The primarch glanced up as the Stormbird's engines changed in pitch, taking the gunship towards the outer defences. It was pocked with return fire but its cannons were still laying down a curtain of blasts along the emplacements. He returned his attention to Arendi. 'You were supposed to be supporting Commander Soukhounou.'

The former bodyguard commander doubled over, coughing and retching. When he looked up at his primarch, Corax saw that Arendi's face was covered with the spreading darkness of massive bruises. He grinned and then winced at the pain this caused.

'Sometimes you're an idiot, Corvus,' said Arendi, using the name that few had since the coming of the Emperor. The primarch bridled at the comment but did not have time to reply before the legionary continued. 'The others told me what you said. "*Do you really think I need a bodyguard?*" That was it, correct?'

Corax recalled saying those words on Isstvan V, after the Thunderhawk carrying them all had been downed.

'Something like that,' the primarch answered, feeling suddenly foolish for such bravado. 'How did you know about... about all of this? Did you know about Nathian?'

'Not as such, no,' said Arendi. The Space Marine tossed away his deformed helmet. 'There were rumours – some of the Legion sided with the traitors after the massacre at the Urgall Depression. There was some connection to this place but nothing solid. We were preparing to link up with Soukhounou when we caught a flash of open-band traffic. Something about a target approaching the commandant's compound. I just figured that, as usual, you would get yourself into more trouble than you were worth. Branne filled us in. Sorry we did not get here sooner.'

The primarch looked away, taking in his surroundings. They were still out in the open and vulnerable to attack. The Raven Guard had despatched the first wave of soldiers from the roofs but more would be on their way.

'Probably best that we move inside,' he told the others, stepping towards the nearest bunker door. 'Follow me. Clear the complex.'

'And if we find that ill-spawned bastard Nathian?' asked one of the legionaries.

'Mine,' Corax snapped in reply. He flexed his fingers in anticipation of them closing on the turncoat Raven Guard. 'Another traitor that needs to be taught the folly of not finishing the task at hand.'

FIFTEEN

Carandiru
[DV +2.5 hours]

The last two survivors fled down the corridor, not looking back. Corax dashed after them, long strides assisted by half-opened wings so that he seemed to glide between every step. Reaching his prey, he drove his armoured hands through their backpacks, shattering vertebrae, and lifted them both from the ground. Their panicked flailing caused him no difficulty.

Another door opened to his left as he tossed their twitching bodies aside. He turned to see several Raven Guard, weapons at the ready, with Arendi at their head.

'Follow me,' said the primarch. He turned his back on the new arrivals to head down the corridor towards the main chamber of the keep.

A cold rage burned through the primarch at the thought of Nathian's betrayal. It was not the notion that a Raven Guard might side with Horus that drew his ire; intellectually Corax understood there would be warriors from his Legion who had fallen to the temptations of rebellion. With Nathian the treachery seemed personal. Corax had favoured Nathian over doubts keenly expressed by others, taking him in to the inner circle of the rebellion on Lycaeus and, later, bringing him into the Raven Guard against the objections of others.

Perhaps that was what angered Corax: that he should have known better. Nathian's betrayal was the primarch's pride staring back at him, an embodiment of Corax's refusal to back down, so often a boon but on occasion a terrible vice.

With these thoughts burning through him the leader of the Raven Guard cut and smashed his way through the scarlet-uniformed soldiers he found in his path, barely giving them a second thought. He gave more mind to the cracks and holes and burns of his armour and the soreness of the wounds within; reminders of how close Nathian had come to killing his former master.

The inner sanctum was located underground, reached by several sloping corridors. Corax stopped to despatch Arendi and the remaining bodyguards to cut off escape, but the primarch knew that Nathian would be waiting for retribution. There had always been a nihilistic streak in the traitor, which Corax had hoped loyalty and dedication to new duty would erase.

Now that he was unfettered by oath or fraternity, Nathian's less favourable tendencies had come to the fore.

Corax descended to the next level and then paused. Nathian had boasted that Corax had been easy to

predict. Did the renegade have some other welcome planned for the primarch in his headquarters? It seemed very likely, but unless Nathian had created a whole brigade of New Men to wait in ambush with a forge world's worth of experimental weapons – and evidence suggested that was not the case – Corax could not foresee what threat the former legionary posed.

The hydraulics of the door rumbled open at Corax's approach. Through the doorway the primarch could see Nathian, his back turned, hunched in front of a bank of screens. Lights glimmered from his black armour and his face was lit by the images on the displays. Corax saw that they were vid-feeds from across Carandiru – scenes of battle around the various installations and monitors showing the populace overthrowing their guards in the internment settlements.

The door opposite hissed open to reveal Arendi's stealthy warriors. Corax held up a hand and waved them back, preferring to enter the traitor's lair alone. He was impervious to all but the most powerful weapons, but his legionaries were not.

Nathian turned as Corax crossed the threshold. He smiled, thin lipped, eyes filled with madness.

'Nice of you to come after me,' said the renegade. 'Welcome to my abode.'

Corax glanced around the chamber. It was about twenty metres across, on two levels, with a broad walkway around the walls alongside consoles of comms equipment and scanning arrays, and a lower circular sub-floor in the middle furnished with chairs, tables and cabinets.

'Messy,' Corax said, curling a lip at the detritus piled on the floor and furnishings. Most seemed to be empty bottles. The primarch cocked a curious eye towards his foe. 'Drinking? Really?'

Nathian shrugged.

''Fraid so, my lord. But have no fear, I'm perfectly sober at the moment. Do you know how hard it is to get drunk when you have all these special extra organs processing toxins out of your bloodstream?' Nathian gestured towards his torso. 'Another fine gift of the Emperor. A man who, if ever I've met one, needs to enjoy a good drink now and then.'

'I am going to kill you,' said Corax.

'Of course you are,' said Nathian.

'But first you are going to answer my questions.'

'If you like.' Nathian said, stepping down into the sub-level. He slumped into an oversized chair, armour wheezing, the metal of the seat protesting under his weight. 'Make yourself comfortable.'

'What happened to you on Isstvan? I thought you were dead,' said Corax, ignoring the traitor's taunts. 'Why turn on me now?'

'You abandoned me first!' snarled Nathian with real passion in his voice and eyes. He stood up and jabbed an accusing finger at the primarch. 'Buried beneath a pile of Word Bearers I slew with my own bolter and blade, you left me and dozens of others.'

'I never left you. I was wounded. Your loyal brothers took me away.'

'Before that,' said Nathian, waving away Corax's reasons. 'When you quit the fight with the Night Haunter and Lorgar. You ran. You left us to die!'

Corax said nothing, jaw tightening at the memory.

'I see you know what I'm talking about. I gave you everything – soul and body, life and death. I believed in you, in the Emperor and his damned crusade. That's what you did to me, Corvus. You made me believe in something, made me proud.' Nathian sighed and turned away, fists clenched. 'And then you left me, proving the lie of everything that had come before.'

'It was not a lie. The treachery of Horus w–'

'Horus? You blame Horus?' The traitor whirled back, eyes bright and wide with rage, blood flushing his pale cheeks. 'Horus was not there on the battlefields of Isstvan. *You* were!' His voice dropped. 'And

Lorgar was there. He found me, and some of the others, hurt and discarded. And when he spoke the fog was lifted from my eyes – fog you have spun around me with your posturing and lies!'

'Lorgar cares nothing for you.'

'He spoke and we listened and it made sense, proper sense, for the first time in decades. The nature of the universe, the things you wouldn't tell us for fear we would see that we no longer needed you. And his love... He loved us and told us so, and we felt the truth of it. And so the love we gave you that was never returned we gave to him instead.'

'Pathetic,' snapped Corax. 'Absolutely pathetic.' He turned slowly, gesturing at everything around them. 'Self-indulgent, pathetic and weak. Everything I would expect of a traitor. You learned nothing from me. You grew up in a prison and now you become the jailer? You want to torture and maim those weaker than you? What vileness did Lorgar and the others pour into you? For the architect of these "New Men", you're nothing but an insane egotist.'

'Really?' Nathian's voice rose in pitch and broke. 'I found a use here. You had a use for me once.' He laughed, baring yellowing teeth. 'And besides, you call *me* insane?'

He bounded up to the outer walkway and stabbed at controls, bringing up a pict-feed on one of the larger screens. Corax felt a knot in his stomach and his mouth dried as he watched a squad of Branne's Raptors breaking into a cell wing – warriors that his gene-manipulations had tainted.

'That's different,' he said before Nathian could voice his accusation, but the words sounded weak, a flimsy excuse, and the traitor knew it.

'So different, my lord. So very different.' Nathian bared his teeth, brow furrowed with rage. 'The difference is that I am honest about what I have done here. You will never stand in judgement of me again, Corvus. None of you!'

He took in a shuddering breath and turned back to the console. His hands activated several controls and then he whirled back to confront Corax. Now there was real madness in his gaze, a mania that made Corax shudder.

'You don't rule my fate. Nobody does!'

Corax's eyes moved to a small screen with a flickering message on the display.

REACTOR SAFEGUARDS DISABLED.

'That is your grand plan?' said Corax. 'Self-destruction? You know I will kill you.'

He saw that Nathian had a bolt pistol in his hand. 'No. No, you will not.'

'That is not going to do me much harm, is it?' said Corax.

'Oh, this is going to hurt you for a long time to come, Corvus. Maybe the rest of your immortal life.'

And with that, Nathian pressed the muzzle of the bolt pistol under his own chin and pulled the trigger.

The bolt cut up through his mouth. A millisecond later, the top of Nathian's head disappeared in a fountain of blood, bone and brains, and he collapsed back onto the console.

Corax's face was spattered red. Jaw clenched, he wiped the gore from his features, unable to tear his gaze from the ruin that he had once called comrade, disturbed in a way that he had not been since he had looked into the eyes of the Night Haunter and seen a dark reflection of himself. Were death and despair the only gifts he had to offer?

Then his eyes flickered to the reactor display. It was at eighty per cent of critical function and had been building for some time – ever since the New Men had been killed, Corax assumed. Nathian's tirade had been nothing but a play for time.

The other door hissed open and Arendi dashed in. His puffy eyes searched the room for threat before they settled on Nathian's corpse. They then moved to the countdown display and widened.

'I heard a shot.'

‘The traitor has set the plasma reactor to overload,’ Corax confirmed as he crossed the chamber.

‘I always thought he was a spiteful bastard.’ There was understandable concern in Arendi’s voice. ‘How long do we have? Should we evacuate?’

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ said Corax. He carefully punched in a command, bringing up a code-protected access display. The primarch’s fingers tapped out numbers on the runepad and then the screen went blank. A few seconds later an acknowledgement scrolled into view.

REACTOR SAFEGUARDS ENABLED. SAFE OPERATIONAL MODE RESTORED.

‘You already knew the code?’ Arendi stared at Corax with awe, mouth open.

‘No,’ replied the primarch. ‘Nathian was never an original thinker. The pass-code was his prisoner number from Lycaeus. Lucky first guess.’

‘I...’ Arendi shook his head, confused and then waved away his concerns. ‘Well, it is good that we’re in no immediate danger. I wouldn’t have believed even Nathian could turn on you, if I hadn’t seen some of the things I’ve seen these last few years. It looks like he couldn’t handle it, even then, whatever his justifications were.’

‘He was weak,’ said Corax. ‘I knew it, and I should never have ignored it.’

‘Seems to me he had a moment of weakness, you’re right. But you’re an idiot if you think it was easy for him. Anyone that’s survived until this point, on either side, has shown a strength of sorts, be it for good or bad.’

‘That’s the second time you’ve called me an idiot, Gherith,’ Corax said quietly. ‘Nathian made the mistake of underestimating me as well.’

‘You think...’ Arendi looked at the headless body. ‘You think I’m like *him*?’

‘I am detecting a fair amount of insubordination in you,’ the primarch said.

Arendi looked wounded at his words. ‘I know things have changed a lot, but I never knew you would put yourself above criticism, Corvus. If I speak out of turn, it’s because I’ve learnt that softening words is a waste of time. Mean what you say, as the saying goes. If you want prim and proper Ultramarines doing as they’re told, or zealous Word Bearers hanging off your every word, you shouldn’t have tried so bloody hard to make us rely on ourselves. If you want Raven Guard, you have to take the rough with the smooth. I remember when you weren’t so keen on formality.’

The former commander seemed to be testing Corax. He had called him ‘Corvus’, just like Nathian, harking back to those older times. Why was he goading his primarch? Maybe there was something else happening here...

‘It was you that told me about this place,’ said Corax.

‘It was.’ Arendi looked around at the screens and nodded. ‘Good thing I did. These “New Men” freaks could have been a big problem, if the traitors had perfected the gene-techniques.’

‘And so it was coincidence that Nathian was here, waiting to trap me?’

‘I wouldn’t call it coincidence, but I don’t know what you’re implying.’

The primarch gestured to the walls around them. ‘A facility dedicated to manipulating and mutating the Legiones Astartes gene-seed? And of all those that might discover it, it falls to me, the one primarch that has learnt more about the origins of our kind than anyone else? That stretches credulity. I think that whoever created this place knew I had access to secret knowledge. How else would they get me here, except through one of my own?’

‘Why are you looking at me like that, Corvus? I brought you here to end this.’

‘End what? My fight? The resistance to Horus? It’s too neat. Victories do not come this easily anymore.’

‘I should warn you – I’m about to use that word a third time, Corvus,’ Arendi muttered, backing away. ‘And some others you might not like.’

Corax stepped closer, looming over the Space Marine, his voice dropping to a whisper. 'How did you get off Isstvan, Gherith? What happened to the others? Where are they now?'

'I don't understand you, lord.' Arendi took another step back, retreating into a console.

'This place was not the secret you were keeping from me. The librarian saw it, in your head. Something you were not telling me. Nathian has made me think about it again. We were lucky to get away from Isstvan with our lives. Nathian did a deal with Lorgar in return for his. How did you get away, Arendi, when so many didn't?'

'I can't believe...' Arendi slumped, jaw trembling, eyes downcast.

'How?' Corax was implacable, barely keeping his anger in check.

'We used them!' Arendi blurted. 'We – myself and the other Raven Guard – were meant to take the lighter and wait for the others. They were attacking the main facility, a feint while we slipped unseen into position. We used the Salamanders and Iron Hands as a distraction and made our escape.'

He stepped back from Corax, his shoulders hunched, his head bowed.

'You sacrificed them?' Corax said, shocked.

It was not the answer he had been expecting, but it was small comfort. The truth was almost as harsh as the primarch's fear had been. Yet for all that, Corax could hear the hurt, the honest guilt, in Arendi's words.

'There were more traitors at the landing field station than we had thought.' Arendi turned haunted, imploring eyes to the primarch. 'We had to leave. *Had* to. If we had waited, nobody would have escaped.'

The primarch looked at the headless corpse and considered two different fates. Arendi, who had continued to hope, and Nathian, who had given in to despair.

'I understand,' he said. 'It was a difficult choice for you.'

Arendi took a breath and straightened, still not meeting the primarch's eye.

It was a worry. Perhaps Arendi had not betrayed his primarch or the Raven Guard, but there were oaths of brotherhood that he had broken. The trust of comrades that he had betrayed. If Lorgar had spun his golden words to Arendi, would he have fared any better than Nathian?

Could any of them ever truly be trusted?

So said the cautious part of him, at least, but Corax knew that in treacherous times it was easy to see traitors everywhere. Could he trust Arendi? No, but then he no longer truly trusted himself. Risks had been taken and confidences had to be earned. If Arendi had wanted Corax dead or in Nathian's clutches, then he could have simply left him to be bested by the New Men.

The only reason to let Corax survive as it had transpired would be to get another traitor close to the primarch. Could such a convoluted suspicion be true?

Caution and paranoia, a grey area easily crossed. No, Corax had no reason *not* to trust Arendi, and the damage done by the knowledge of Nathian's treachery becoming known could be offset by the example set by Arendi and his companions.

Hope was too valuable an asset to sacrifice it to paranoia.

'One other thing, Gherith.'

'Lord Corax?'

The primarch did not have to trust Arendi, but he could choose to. For the moment, at least.

'Thank you. For keeping faith with me.'

Corax leads the search through the prison complex

EPILOGUE

Carandiru
[DV +2 days]

‘I’m not sure this is right,’ said Branne. The words were spoken quietly but the weight of his disagreement spoke at far greater volume.

Corax looked down at the commander and then across to the squads of Raptors forming up on the ramps leading to the underground complex where the failed New Men were still imprisoned.

‘We cannot leave them alive,’ Corax said heavily.

‘No, lord, but...’ Branne waved a hand at the Raptors. ‘Why them?’

The primarch studied the groups of misshapen warriors gathering around their squad leaders. Nearby their clean-limbed brother-Raptors watched in silence, standing guard over files of enemy soldiers being led out of the compound.

‘This was your assigned battlezone, commander,’ said Corax. He kept his voice quiet and calm, but he was not immune to Branne’s misgivings. ‘I know it seems cruel but it has to be this way. No special treatment. That’s what we said.’

‘Monsters to kill monsters,’ whispered Branne. ‘Is this what we’ve become?’

Corax did not share his thoughts as he watched the first of the squads descending into the complex, bestial and deformed. He replayed Nathian’s final act of spite in his memory.

Perhaps, he thought, *this was what we have always been*.

THE VALUE OF FEAR

The whirr of the atmospheric cycling unit masked what little sound was emitted by Sergeant Ashel's armour. He padded along the overhead gantry and took up a watch-station above the rebels' meeting point. Easing his bolter into position, he checked the shadows cast by the huge filtration cylinders. He could see nothing, which was good, because the rest of his squad was located there, metres from the traitors' rendezvous.

The tread of feet, two dozen, alerted him to the approach of the targets. He gave his surroundings one last glance to check that he had accounted for every light source. He was swathed in blackness, the underhive environmental stacks a perfect hunting ground. Darkness abounded, and every hab-tract was littered with scores of entries and exits.

Four days of study had located the weak points in the enemy's perimeter. Painstakingly, Ashel and his warriors had infiltrated the target area and identified the weapon emplacements, the rat-routes, the crawl spaces and the choke points the enemy used. All had been circumvented. Now the Raven Guard had word from a turncoat within the traitor ranks – word of a meeting between the chief operatives and their weapons supplier.

His prey were heavily armed. Each had a tattoo on his cheek of a serpent's head. Gangsters, turned to rebels by the manipulation of the Alpha Legion. Lord Corax had been adamant that the uprising on Phelderus was quelled immediately, and personally led the task force that had arrived to do just that.

The grumbling of a small motor heralded the arrival of the gun-runner. He rode a thick-wheeled trike pulling an armoured trailer. The weapons had to be inside, stolen from a watch-commorancy two days earlier. Riding on the trailer was a monstrous bodyguard with jutting tusks who wielded a brutal hammer in one hand and a shotgun in the other.

The plan was simple but effective. Remove the rebels and their supply of weapons, and work inwards towards their base, eliminating resistance in a methodical and controlled manner. Ashel whispered the command-word that would start the attack.

'Shadowstrike.'

He opened fire, putting a single gas-propelled bolt into the eye of the ogryn. It collapsed backwards, brain turned to pulp, but the detonation was somehow contained by its thick skull. The blur of rounds criss-crossed the space between the atmospheric heat exchangers and the coolant risers. The only other noises were the panicked shouts and pained cries of the rebels to the tempo of stalker bolts punching through flesh.

The survivors of the first salvo laid about their surroundings with rapid-firing slug throwers and lasrifles. The gun-runner pulled out a plasma pistol, stupidly large in his hands. Ashel noted that it was an

Imperial army issue. There would be further investigation to locate the source.

Before the weapons dealer could open fire, Ashel put two bolts into the smuggler's chest.

The rebel leader turned and fled, leaving the fighting and dying to his minions. Ashel followed along his high vantage point, endeavouring to keep the sights of his modified bolter squarely aimed at the seditionist's back, waiting for the moment to fire.

He felt movement beside him just as he was about to pull the trigger, a moment before the man was out of sight. Something nudged his arm as his trigger finger curled. His bolt flew past the target's head and exploded harmlessly against a pipe support.

Snarling, he turned to confront the warrior that had interfered with his kill. He wore armour of the darkest blue, almost the black of the Raven Guard, and just as stealthy. *In midnight clad*, he would always claim, this wayward son of the VIII Legion. Ashel was not surprised.

'Nuon!'

'I just saved you from making a critical error,' said the Night Lord.

'Secure the area! I will pursue.'

Ashel vaulted over the rail of the gantry and landed on the ferrocrete floor four metres below. His war-plate absorbed the impact and he broke into a run. The thud of feet behind him announced the presence of Kasati Nuon just at his shoulder.

'I ordered you to secure the area,' Ashel hissed.

'Better that you do not waste several days' hard work for the sake of pride.'

The insurrectionist dodged between two plasteel pillars and disappeared. Ashel could not squeeze through the gap and was forced to sling his bolter and climb a stanchion to continue the pursuit. Nuon was just two steps behind as the rebel zig-zagged across the space between two dormant turbines.

'If he reaches his base,' said Ashel, 'he will alert the defenders to our presence.'

'Precisely.'

Ashel wondered why Commander Soukhounou had chosen him to guide the Night Lord in the ways of the Raven Guard. Nuon's acidic tone and superior attitude had not enamoured him to his fellow squad members.

'Didn't you listen to Lord Corax's axioms?'

'Very carefully.'

'And which part of "be other than where the enemy believes you to be" was unclear?'

The rebel dived and rolled beneath a pipeline, dropping down into a brightly lit space below. Ashel and Nuon had to follow down a metal stairway and found themselves on the platform of an abandoned transit station. A hatch between the tracks fell shut as they emerged into the high-ceilinged chamber.

'I understand the intent, but it is narrow-minded to think that stealth solves all problems. Sometimes it is better for the foe to know *exactly* his predicament. Do not underestimate the value of fear.'

'I would prefer that we found our enemies unawares, all the same,' Ashel replied. 'It is much easier to kill them that way.'

'It is even easier when they have surrendered.'

They reached the hatch. Nuon lifted the cover as Ashel stood ready with his bolter. No booby-trap or sudden fire greeted them.

'See? He flees in terror. He is their leader, so his terror will spread. He has seen shadows annihilate his men. That is a far greater weapon than stealth. It will make them cautious, defensive. Predictable.'

'And his handlers?' The hatch was wide enough for them to drop down into the maintenance duct beneath the rails. There was a thin covering of water and the splash of their prey's retreating footsteps could be heard to the left. Ashel set off, his battleplate's autosenses flicking to low light mode, the merest glimmer

of movement ahead. 'Did you think to frighten the Alpha Legionnaires that coordinate his cause?'

The rebel disappeared again – a last flutter of movement heading upwards. Ashel did not wait for a reply.

'Be thankful that the structure of the below-city prevents long range vox-casting. If we are swift we will silence him before he can warn those in his headquarters.'

'You should give them time to worry. We will follow him back to his lair. He is scared, not thinking properly. He will run not to his men, but to the greatest power he knows, thinking it will protect him. He will take us to the Alpha Legionnaires.'

'And then what? I ask again, do your 'terror tactics' break the conditioning of Legiones Astartes training?'

Nuon chuckled. 'It does not have to, Sergeant Ashel. Alpharius's sons have already broken it for us. They have turned. They have reneged on oaths firmly sworn. They have placed themselves above duty, above sacrifice. They do not know it yet, perhaps, but they want to live. When our scampering friend reaches them, they will know that it is the Raven Guard that hunt them. For the first time in many years they will hesitate. Fear does not have to send them screaming – it simply needs to dull the wits for the moment it takes to make a mistake.'

They came to the exit used by the rebel leader. A grate was left half-across the opening at the top of a short ladder. The rungs were bent, but held under the weight of Ashel as he climbed.

'Posturing for the sake of pride,' he said. 'You announce your presence because you simply can't handle the thought that you might not be recognised as the ones that hold power. Corax has taught us differently, and you need to learn quickly. We are nothing, just shadows. We do not need credit or glory. We win. That is all.'

The ladder brought them to a larger terminus building at the end of the transit line. Echoing footsteps were easy to follow, ringing back down from a stairwell directly ahead. Ashel unslung his bolter, knowing that he was just a few dozen metres from his prey. The sergeant recalled something the Night Lord had said a little earlier.

'You would kill those that have surrendered? Why? That would make the enemy fight harder, wouldn't it?'

'Not if they do not find out,' replied Nuon. 'I would not suggest parading the fact to the survivors. In fact, treat them well and have them say as much for a few days. Dread works best in contrast to hope. Torture a few others, have them scream their confessions of resistance across the vox. They will make a compelling argument. And when the enemy capitulate, slaughter them to avoid any risk of further disobedience.'

Ashel was not sure whether to be amazed or appalled by his companion's cold-hearted assertion. Certainly the Raven Guard had perpetrated some ruthless campaigns in their time, but the philosophies of the Night Haunter seemed purposefully callous.

'What makes you such an expert on oathbreakers?'

'I know that I am not one,' Nuon replied quietly. 'But I slew many to be here. As I said, breaking one's oaths is a sign of weakness. I will die a warrior, not a victim.'

They fell silent as the pursuit took them into a industrial zone near the edge of the sprawling, half-buried city. There was almost no light at all, the area as abandoned as the track that had brought the Space Marines to it. The roof had collapsed in places, breaking under the weight of accumulated hab-tracts above. Broken pipes spilled fresh water and waste in streams and pools around the cracked pillars of the hive's foundations.

On thermal scan, the fleeing rebel could be seen skulking no more than a hundred and fifty metres away, using a heavily riveted cylindrical vat as cover. Ashel could hear the man's heavy breathing as he dragged

something from his waistband and held it to his mouth.

'A vox,' snarled Ashel. 'I said as much would happen.'

The rebel's whisper still carried to the boosted senses of the genhanced legionaries.

'They killed all my men! I'm a dead man if you don't let me in.'

The voice that replied was muffled, distorted on purpose. *'You have failed us. You have led the enemy to our gate and expect sanctuary. Your fate is already sealed.'*

'You don't underst–'

Ashel saw nothing, but one moment the rebel was hissing into the vox-unit, and the next he was gone. The sergeant hurried forwards, Nuon close on his heels. Moving to the hiding spot, they found a bright splash of fresh blood sprayed up the side of the vat.

'What happened?' demanded the former Night Lord. 'Where did he go?'

Before Ashel could answer, the crack of bolters broke the stillness. He responded without thought, throwing himself aside as a fusillade of rounds slammed into the nook where he had been a moment before. He rolled, seeking the source of the salvo. Muzzle flare highlighted a pair of previously hidden firing ports cut into a seemingly solid buttress about forty metres from his position. More bolts detonated against a stanchion just beside his left shoulder.

'How do we outflank them?' asked Nuon, from across the gap by the bolt-riddled vat.

'Your plan didn't extend this far, eh?'

Ashel was considering the problem when suddenly the fusillade ceased.

The sergeant waited, listening intently, but heard nothing. No sounds of reloading, no armour servos or crackle of vox signal. He peered cautiously around the stanchion. No fire greeted him.

'They've gone,' declared Nuon, moving from cover, bolter at the ready. 'Fled, no doubt.'

The two of them located an entryway cut into the wall behind the broad buttress, and within they found a maintenance duct easily wide enough for the two of them. Crates of supplies and equipment lined one wall.

Four armoured figured lay slumped next to the boxes, their armour carved open.

Out of the darkness a narrow, pale face appeared, spattered with crimson, framed by shoulder-length hair. Nuon brought up his gun, but Ashel knocked the bolter aside.

'Hold your fire!'

The ghostly figure resolved into Corax, primarch of the Raven Guard. He held up a bloodied claw, and Nuon backed away.

'Your distraction was useful,' Corax said quietly.

As swiftly as he appeared, the primarch faded into the shadows without sign or sound. In moments, Ashel knew that he was gone. Nuon was looking around the interior of the concealed bunker, clearly shaken by the encounter. The Night Lord's roaming gaze settled on Ashel.

'Now *that* is truly terrifying.'

RAPTOR

Initial scans showed that the crippled ship was as lifeless as a corpse. It spun slowly along its long axis as it drifted out-system, reactor dead, environmental systems compromised. Major life signals negative.

Navar Hef turned awkwardly, the bulk of his misshapen body and elongated arms inconvenient in the close confines of his ship's bridge. His armour was a fusion of old Mark II and Mark III plate, an artifice of the Raven Guard Techmarines to fit the lieutenant's hugely muscled form and bent spine. They had even fashioned a helm that could fit him, taken from an incomplete set of Terminator armour. It made him claustrophobic and when not in battle he kept it hanging from his belt.

The Raven Guard lieutenant looked at the data coming back from the sensors of the *Fearless*. Gauntlets altered to accommodate his clawed hands tapped at the panel controls. Hef spoke with deliberate care, so that the bulky tongue and fangs with which he had been afflicted did not mar his words.

'No battle damage?'

His second-in-command, Sergeant Neroka was clean-limbed, one of the early intakes of the Raptors before the curse of mutation had taken hold in the Raven Guard recruits. Amongst themselves, the Raptors called such an untainted warrior a 'smooth'. The sergeant turned from the navigational and weapons controls, and shook his head in reply to Hef's question.

'No scarring on the hull. No obvious breaches, residual radiation or shell fragments.'

'So, a boarding action,' Hef murmured. 'The attackers closed in without firing a shot, daring the guns of the defenders all the way. They would have to be much larger, better protected.'

The third occupant of the small command space spoke from the communications console.

'There is a Legion identifier transmission. Decoding now.'

To those that did not know him, Devor was an apparition dragged from a nightmare. A 'rough' like Hef, he possessed no skin, his muscle and blood vessels exposed to the world. He said that it caused him no pain but for the ache brought on from the tusks that sprouted from either side of his jaw. In all other respects he wore the regular Mark VI armour that was almost exclusive to the Raptors contingent.

He looked up from the screen. 'It comes out as... the Sixth! The ship belongs to the Wolves of Fenris.'

'What are Space Wolves doing out here?' asked Neroka. 'I don't recognise the exact class but it's a rapid deployment vessel. They were in a hurry to get somewhere.'

'What *were* they doing?' Hef agreed. 'They clearly ran into more trouble than they could handle.'

'Maybe this is what Lord Corax sent us to find,' suggested Devor.

'It could be. There have been dozens of sightings and random warp-echoes picked up by the Librarians since Lord Corax issued his muster order. He didn't give any details – the order came through Commander Branne to investigate the system based on a dream-watch by Librarian Kurthuri. The

commander was not very specific and he didn't sound hopeful. We need to take a closer look.'

Neroka returned to his position to carry out the lieutenant's will. 'I would guess that the Space Wolves picked up Lord Corax's message and followed it this far before getting caught out by someone else.'

'Guessing is for gamblers,' said Hef. 'Call the company to arms, full battle protocols. Unlike the Space Wolves, we'll not be taken unawares.'

Inside the docking gantry extended by the *Fearless*, the hiss of the las-cutter melting through the heavy bulkhead sounded particularly loud. Hef was not sure if it was his hearing, which continued to get sharper and sharper over time, or simply the enclosed space that linked his light cruiser to the empty Space Wolves vessel.

'We could have been aboard by now if we had taken the Storm Eagle,' whispered Nakaska, probably thinking that his commanding officer could not hear. It was true, it had taken some skillful manoeuvring from Neroka and considerable time to exactly match the target ship's tumbling trajectory in order for the docking to take place.

'Would you rather we boarded with the twenty warriors that can be carried in a Storm Eagle, or our entire complement of fifty?' Hef growled. 'I would rather take the extra time and have the firepower to hand.'

'No disrespect was meant, Lieutenant Navar.'

'What do you really think we'll find?' Neroka had known Hef far longer, since they had both been children growing up in the same hab-cavern on Deliverance, and he was less abashed in his opinion. 'The close range scans told us nothing more. The ship is an empty wreck. You're too cautious these days.'

'I almost killed an ally on Carandiru because of recklessness. It is better to take care now than rue hastiness later. And you are wrong – this isn't a wreck. As far as we can tell, we just have to restart the reactor and it's as good as the day it left the orbital dock.'

'No lifesigns, Hef. It's abandoned.'

'The question is, why?'

Any speculation was cut short as the Raptor wielding the las-cutter stepped back and the sliced portion of hull fell inwards with a resounding clang. Within moments the Raven Guard were through the breach, their bolters at the ready as they covered the entry chamber, the gloom beyond broken by the glow of helmet lenses as auto-senses scoured the darkness.

'Split by combat squads, full sweep,' Hef commanded. He pointed his chainsword ahead, the only weapon he carried because his hands were too unwieldy to operate a bolter anymore. 'You have your scan results and grid routes from the briefing, leave nowhere unchecked. Augurs set for wide spectrum analysis. Any trouble, alert and withdraw. Do not get engaged in a fight until we understand what we're facing.'

The Raven Guard dispersed quickly fore and aft, up and down, moving out in a search pattern that Hef and Neroka had devised from the scan data. The lieutenant and his command squad headed up towards the prow, their zone of control centred on the scout vessel's command bridge and the surrounding chambers.

There was nothing to disturb their advance, the only sounds the wheeze and click of power armour, and the grunts and snorts from some of the more facially disfigured Raptors. With the environmental systems virtually on standby the air was thin, breathable for a legionary, but only just. There was no whine of fans or thrum of generators and the squads advanced into darkness.

Devor frowned, his skinless brow furrowing.

'Shutting down a reactor takes time. You can't just throw a switch. I would say that someone was attempting to hide this vessel, hoping to eradicate their energy signature.'

‘Why not kill the identity transmitter as well?’ said Hef. ‘It was that signal that tipped us to the ship’s existence.’

‘Whatever they were hiding from wasn’t fooled, so perhaps they sent out a low energy pulse as a distress signal?’ suggested Neroka.

The fourth member of the squad cut into the conversation. His name was Kaddian Styrus, one of the First Nine, the initial recruits subjected to the Raptor creation process. Four of his companions from that fateful day were now dead, and Hef’s contingent regarded Kaddian’s continued presence as a sort of talisman.

‘It could be that the abandoned ship was a decoy. It looks crippled, almost dead from a distance. In the time an enemy discovered the truth, the Space Wolves might have slipped away by some other means.’

‘The command records on the bridge will have the answers,’ Hef replied. ‘At least, some of them.’

They continued, progress slow but methodical, checking every stairwell, conveyor shaft, cupboard, weapons locker and chamber on their route. The touch of the Space Wolves was unmistakeable. The party found banners with Fenrisian images and runes on them, all kinds of trophies from hunting and battle, and many personal belongings that had been left behind.

‘These Wolves bring their home with them,’ remarked Devor.

Hef lifted up the polished skull of a canine animal. The incisors were as long as his claws. ‘Trinkets and souvenirs.’

‘They certainly take up a lot of space,’ muttered Neroka. ‘You can tell these are warriors that grew up beneath the open sky.’

‘I hear they are fearsome fighters, the Emperor’s watch dogs,’ said Devor.

‘And I’ve heard Commander Branne be less complimentary,’ Hef replied. ‘I think that Lord Corax and Russ might have... *argued* in the past.’

Neroka laughed. ‘Is there a primarch our lord did not fall out with, at some time or another?’

‘Are you suggesting the fault lies with Lord Corax?’

‘There are few of his brothers that he has not chastised as self-promoting. The others think him churlish to belittle their achievements. Or so I hear.’

‘The Emperor didn’t create the primarchs for mass adulation.’

‘But it is a consequence, all the same.’

The two of them fell silent as the squad reached the next chamber. Kaddian went in first beside the last squad member, another ‘smooth’ called Calda Sentox, who carried the squad’s bulky plasma cannon.

‘It’s clear,’ he announced.

Hef looked in. The walls were hung with banners and wolf-skin totems. A long table was covered with another pelt upon which numerous amulets and other jewellery were laid. There were also several large, gilded fangs and another skull, all inscribed with angular runes. At first the lieutenant thought the chamber was the quarters of an officer, but there was no cot or personal locker.

‘A trophy room?’ said Kaddian, pointing his bolter towards an ork skull amongst the animal remains.

‘I don’t think so.’ Hef gestured at two benches lined up in front of the ornament-filled table. ‘More like some kind of... shrine?’

‘Why would the Space Wolves have a fane on their ship?’ asked Devor. ‘What are they worshipping?’

‘I’m not sure I want to know,’ said Neroka. ‘Not with some of the things we’ve seen in the past few years.’

‘More questions, and no answers,’ muttered Hef. The lieutenant waved for his squad to leave. ‘Let’s get to the bridge.’

They cleared the rest of the command deck, leaving the strategium located at the top of the ship until last. Hef was about to open the doors when he received a contact across the vox. He recognised the voice of

Sergeant Foss, one of the squad that had been sent to investigate the weapon batteries in the lower decks.

'*Third detachment reporting. Lieutenant, we've found something down here. Bodies.*'

'Who? What sort of bodies?'

'*Three of them. Space Wolves. I think. Wearing their armour.*'

'You think?'

'*They've been... disfigured. You should come and see, lieutenant.*'

'Very well, everybody secure their position and hold fast. Kaddian, Calda – remain here, be on your guard.'

It took a while to reach the prow portion of the ship without the power for conveyors and elevators, even for the augmented legionaries. They came across the first of Foss' squad guarding an armoury, the huge security doors open, the locks bearing the hallmark scars of a melta-charge.

Neroka pointed to the ruined mechanisms. 'Someone blasted their way in. I suppose they didn't have the codes.'

Hef examined the doors more closely.

'Not so. These locks were destroyed from the inside.'

This unsettling news quelled any further chatter, and the lieutenant moved on until he found Foss standing in the corridor close to the entrance to the lower reactor decks. The sergeant said nothing. He stepped aside and waved Hef and his companions into the next chamber.

It was an outer security lock, the doors to the main reactor still sealed. There was little to distinguish the chamber from any number of others around the vital parts of the ship, except for the battle-damage on the walls and the three power-armoured bodies lying on the deck.

The colours were unmistakeably those of the VI Legion. The Space Wolves' war-plate was broken and battered in many places, and they wore no helms. Their faces had been horribly mutilated, burned and cut beyond recognition. As for the visible markings on the armour, there was nothing that Hef recognised.

'Anybody see rank indicators? Squad icons, maybe?'

The others shook their heads, equally baffled. Neroka crouched next to one of the corpses. His hands moved across the jagged holes and tears in the war-plate.

'Bolt wounds, power sword cuts, chainswords, maybe even a plasma detonation... Whoever attacked them really wasn't taking chances that they might survive.'

'Who?' Hef asked. 'Who wanted them dead? We've seen nothing of the attackers. No bodies, no sign of forced boarding, no battle except in this room.'

Devor paced around the chamber, examining the blast marks and molten scars on the walls.

'Looks more like an execution,' he said. 'Concentrated clusters of fire. Maybe whoever was locked in the armoury escaped and ambushed these three, before reaching the main reactor.'

'It makes as much sense as any other explanation.' Hef looked back at Sergeant Foss. 'Have the remains taken back to the *Fearless*. We don't know what happened here, but we can mark the passing of these warriors properly.'

'Yes, lieutenant.'

Hef left the chamber, disturbed by what he had seen. There was something about the bodies that didn't sit right, aside from the fact that they existed at all. Devor was similarly vexed and put his concern into words as they made their way back to where Kaddian and Calda waited.

'I know there wasn't much left of them, but don't you think that some of that damage looked like it came from *inside* their armour?'

'Bolt detonations can do that,' said Neroka. 'A chainsword can rip up power armour pretty well too, or

pass straight through, depending on how it hits.'

Devor didn't seem convinced but held his tongue. They kept their silence until they reached the main command bridge again. The doors were opened by simple keypad, no codes required. Stepping inside, Hef scanned the small chamber and saw nothing out of place. It was dark, the systems on minimal power, but he could see no signs of damage or fighting. The fitful glow of scanner screens illuminated empty chairs and glinted from unmanned consoles.

'Devor, get their navigational logs online. Neroka, I want to see the records from the weapon arrays. We might learn something.'

The two Raven Guard legionaries busied themselves at the panels while Hef paced the room, his closer inspection revealing nothing out of the ordinary.

It was Neroka that found what he was looking for first.

'No weapons activity in the last thirty days, Hef. If they got into a fight, they didn't fire a shot to defend themselves. Void shields haven't been active either. If someone got the jump on them, they did it with total surprise and were on board before the Space Wolves could even activate the point defence turrets.'

A negative chime sounded. 'Strange,' muttered Devor.

'What have you got?' asked Hef.

'Until seven days ago, the ship was in orbit above a moon of the second planet in this system. It'd been there for fourteen days before. Someone sent it out-system on purpose. Last warp jump was a little over twenty days ago.'

'That makes no sense,' said Kaddian. 'Who would send a perfectly capable ship into the void? Why would they do that?'

'No command logs, so I suppose we'll never know.'

Hef leaned against the main command throne to consider his options.

'Something has happened here, and not good, whatever way you look at it. We should send a warning that there may be enemies in this sector.'

'Wait for reinforcements?' suggested Devor.

Hef caught Neroka looking at him. Though it was impossible to see the sergeant's expression behind his helm, he could make a good guess at his old friend's thoughts.

'It would take too long,' the lieutenant said. 'Whatever happened here occurred in the last few days. If the Space Wolves encountered traitors–'

'Or *are* traitors,' Neroka interrupted him.

'Maybe. Either way, the enemy could be away from here before we catch up with them. The only place we're going to find more answers is on that moon.'

'So what do we do?' asked Devor.

'We'll finish the sweep and return to the *Fearless*. Full silent running, reflex shields on, we'll move in-system and see what there is to see.'

'And this ship?'

'We'll leave it here for now. When we've resolved the current situation, we will let Legion command know its whereabouts and they can send a recovery team. For the moment, let it carry on drifting. Let's leave no sign that we were ever here.'

Enveloped by a layer of reflex shielding that all but nullified its energy output, the *Fearless* ghosted towards the second planet of the star system. The necessities of silent running required that the scanners performed only at minimal, passive power settings, meaning that Hef knew little of what they would find on the world until they were almost in high orbit. Such was the price of secrecy, but the opportunity to

approach unheralded outweighed any shortcomings of the technology.

As when they discovered the Space Wolves strike vessel, Hef, Neroka and Devor were at their stations. The lieutenant waited in silence, eyes flicking from one display to another, looking for any telltale sign of danger.

A radiation sensor bank spiked, detecting an energy source thirty thousand kilometres ahead, almost out of detection range. It was in orbit on the far side of the planet. Hef resisted the urge to order an active scan, knowing that such a move could just as likely reveal their presence as it would provide any further information. Instead, he left it to Neroka to compile a report from the other functioning sensory equipment. It took several minutes, but eventually the sergeant turned and spoke quietly to his commander.

'Definitely an orbiting ship, not a static source. Sensor flicker shows a residual wash from orbit-to-surface communication, directed at one of the moons. Not strong enough to be an installation. I would say landed troops. Energy signature is either a strike cruiser-class ship at full readiness, or something larger with systems on standby, perhaps a battle-barge.'

'A battle-barge? We can't hope to match that sort of firepower, or troop complement.'

'It's more likely to be something comparable to the *Fearless*, Hef. Who would be orbiting a world with troops active on the surface but weapons on standby? We can probably take them with the element of surprise on our side.'

Unasked, Devor added his opinion from the communication console.

'We have the edge. There's no chance they can know there's another ship here. Perfect for a stealth attack.'

'Not until we know more,' said Hef. 'If we move in for the attack, I want to be sure. What can you tell from the comm-feed?'

'No idea what they're saying to each other, but there are definitely ground troops on the largest natural satellite. Can't decode the messages but the databanks say it's a variation on a cryptoband used by the Sons of Horus.'

Neroka growled his displeasure. 'The Warmaster's own scum, come to pay us a visit. We should give them a welcome they won't survive.'

'I'm not convinced,' said Hef. 'If the Sons of Horus are what the Librarians detected, we should relay that information back to Lord Corax and await instruction. They could be in other systems nearby, too. But the Space Wolves being here, that I don't understand. Where are they? Captured perhaps?'

'We can't just run away,' said Neroka.

It took some effort for the lieutenant to keep his voice quiet in the face of such an accusation.

'No one is running away, sergeant. I have yet to finish my assessment. If the Sons of Horus have warriors on the ground, we need to know what they are doing. It might also show us what brought the Space Wolves here.'

'We can't scan too close to that other ship,' said Devor. 'I don't think we'll be able to break their code system either. How are we going to find out what they're doing?'

'The best way.' Hef grinned at the thought of some combat action. 'Neroka and I will go and have a look for ourselves.'

The surface of the moon proved to be a mass of chasms and crags, the ruddy, iron-heavy rock striated with glittering layers. The atmosphere was nominally breathable but the Raven Guard marched in full war-plate, which meant that Hef's small contingent was composed of Raptors capable of wearing their helms. His felt stuffy, the improvised filtration systems not quite up to standard specification.

The journey from their landing site was several dozen kilometres over rough terrain, but low gravity and

enhanced physiology made short work of the distance despite the deep cliffs and steep gorges that had to be crossed. The broken terrain, and its metallic composition, was perfect for the Raven Guard to approach the Sons of Horus undetected, both visually and by the enemy's scans from orbit.

Nearing the site of the surface transmissions, Hef and the rest of his infiltration team headed for high ground to survey the route ahead. They located a blade-sharp ridge, four hundred metres high, overlooking the area of the communication they had intercepted from orbit. The Raven Guard climbed the ridge carefully.

Beyond, the ground fell away swiftly into a deep ravine that stretched as far as the horizon. Close by, no more than a kilometre away, Thunderhawks sat in the shadow of a tall spur of rock, and around the dropships were stockpiles of metal boxes and barrels, guarded by patrolling Space Marines in the livery of the Sons of Horus.

The sky in the distance was lit by las-fire and the blaze of heavy weapons, much of which erupted from gun towers built into the rock spires around a small facility a few kilometres away. Hef could see the Sons of Horus in and around the channels and cliff faces that surrounded the fortification, though the elongated dusk shadows made spotting them difficult even with his auto-senses dialled up to full.

'Some kind of listening post, perhaps?' The lieutenant pointed to a burning wreck not far from the embattled keep. He could make out the shattered remnants of another Thunderhawk fuselage. 'It's got anti-air weapons for a start, and probably anti-*orbital* since the Sons of Horus ship is staying well away.'

Neroka glanced back at him. 'A listening post? Is this why the Sons of Horus came here? Seems pretty worthless at the moment. A barren moon circling an empty world.'

'Someone is inside, that's for sure. Maybe our Space Wolves.'

Hef looked around, memorising the layout of the canyons below. Then he returned his attention to the enemy warriors.

'Too hard to count them, but even if they all survived the Thunderhawk crash then that makes no more than ninety of them, maybe a hundred. A skeleton crew left aboard the ship. You were right, it can't be a battle-barge – or if it is, they're woefully undermanned.'

'If they want whatever's in that station, it's our duty to stop them getting it,' said Neroka. 'This is what Lord Corax wanted, to take the fight to enemy wherever possible.'

'I don't know why you think I need any encouragement. We're here now, so we'll see this through to the end. Killing Horus' thugs isn't a duty, it's a pleasure.'

The infiltration squad followed their lieutenant down into the maze of gorges. Scouts were sent ahead and they advanced warily, alert for any overflight or sentries posted by the Sons of Horus. They regularly sought the higher ground to keep an eye on their foes, but it seemed the Warmaster's forces were wholly concentrated on the small fortress, unaware of any other threat.

Progress became a lot harder on the final approach to the citadel. Hef could hear the bark of bolters and the snap of las-fire echoing down the gorge ahead, and beyond the steep rocks to the right he could see the detonation of shells and flare of lasers. Looking up he saw the planet around which the moon orbited – an enormous orb of shifting orange and purple gases, not far from occluding the local star.

'We'll wait for darkness,' he murmured. 'Full stealth measures.'

The Raven Guard dispersed along the valley, their black armoured invisible in the deepening shadows. Each found a concealed spot and powered down his battleplate, running on minimal systems only. Hef remained on watch, all systems except his auto-senses reduced in power as he crouched in the darkness behind a finger of rock twice as tall as him.

Now and then he would turn his head slowly, scanning along the ridge tops and cliffs with full-spectrum vision. The sky glittered with the sheen of battle, pulses of heat and ultraviolet energy creating fountains

and whorls long after the visible flash of flame and las-fire dissipated. He was still amazed by the whole spectacle of war hidden from the sight of unenhanced warriors, and felt privileged to have been chosen to witness its destructive beauty.

He watched and waited until the star disappeared from the sky and an all-blanketing darkness descended over the moon.

'On my location. Kharvo, take up forward scout position. Nastar, take sternguard. Movement by pairs, fifty metre intervals. Follow me.'

The air buzzed with armour powering up as the dormant Raven Guard came back to life. Around Hef, the darkness moved.

They had advanced no more than another two hundred metres when the vox clicked three times – a signal from Kharvo to stop. Hef froze along with the others, his auto-senses picking up the sound of footfalls and disturbed stones, though he could see nothing. With deliberate steps he moved forward, keeping close to the cliff face. Patience was his greatest strength, moving with such slowness that his armour made virtually no sound, his tread so light that he could not even hear it himself.

Eventually he reached Kharvo, a blurred shadow slightly darker than the rock behind him. The Raven Guard extended a hand, pointing up and to the left. On a shelf of rock about thirty metres above the valley stood two Sons of Horus. They were obviously sentries, but both kept looking back down the valley, distracted by the ongoing battle.

'Neroka, join us.'

It was some time before the sergeant arrived, during which Hef had completed a detailed survey of the cliffs on either side.

'Take them from above. Neither is paying much attention. Kill essential.'

Neroka and Kharvo said nothing before disappearing into the darkness. Hef moved towards the Sons of Horus, choosing a spot less than a hundred metres away, from where he could see them clearly silhouetted against the starry sky.

Nothing happened for a while, but the lieutenant kept his gaze fixed on the traitors, trusting his fellow Raven Guard to be watching his back, alert to any other danger.

All of a sudden, the helm of the closest traitor erupted, spraying blood and ceramite shards. His companion half-raised his bolter as he looked up, but Hef heard the crack of an optical lens shattering and the second traitor fell, falling to the ground a moment after the first. Almost immediately, two darkly armoured figures slid down the steep incline. One stooped briefly, a blackened knife cutting across the throats of the downed warriors. The pair then stood, instantly assuming the poses of those they had just slain.

Hef activated the squad vox.

'Route is clear. Move on.'

From the lip of a narrow defile not far from the armoured station, Hef could see the base more clearly. It consisted of a central building, hexagonal in shape, on three storeys. Corridors linked this to a trio of outbuildings, which in turn were joined by armoured earthworks to an outer ring of turrets and empty gun positions. Judging by the fire patterns, the gun platforms were firing on automatic, spewing bursts of autocannon and laser fire at the Sons of Horus that surrounded the facility. The traitors had raised works of their own and had evidently had several days to do so. A few of their dead could be seen lying in the kill-zone closer to the defensive guns.

To one side of the main structure was a cluster of communications antennae and dishes. Hef activated the command link built into his vambrace and sighted the narrow-beam transmitter onto the vox-array.

‘Attention station occupants. Can you receive this message?’ He waited for a few moments. ‘Attention station occupants. Can you receive–’

His vox-bead crackled as it detected an incoming transmission.

‘*We hear you. This is Packmaster Arvan Woundweaver of the Wolves of Fenris, and you choose a bad day to taunt me, traitor filth.*’

‘Negative, Packmaster. This is Lieutenant Navar Hef, we’re here to help. We’re not from the Sons of Horus.’

The pause that followed could only mean that Woundweaver was not sure what to make of this change of circumstance. He soon made up his mind.

‘*Go away, we don’t need any assistance, thanks all the same. We have these idiots right where we want them.*’

Hef could scarcely believe what he had heard.

‘Please say again. There are fifty, maybe a hundred or more, Sons of Horus besieging this station. How many of you are there?’

‘*Enough. Go away before you spoil everything.*’

‘With respect, we didn’t sneak our way through the enemy lines just to turn around and go back to our ship without finding out what’s happening here.’

‘*Sneak through? What Legion are you, Hef?*’

‘Nineteenth Legion, Raptors contingent. We found your ship.’

‘*The Raven Guard! Why didn’t you say? We’ve been looking for you for a long time. Let us know when you’re at the perimeter, we’ll open one of the gates for you.*’

The sound of approaching engines alerted Hef to a change in the movements of the Sons of Horus close by. He turned to see two armoured carriers peeling off from the main attack, heading in the direction of the Raven Guard. A Predator tank followed them.

‘Packmaster, is this channel comms-shielded?’

‘*What for? No point trying to hide, the enemy know exactly where we are.*’

‘But they didn’t know where we were!’ Hef switched to his squad frequency. ‘Rapid advance, the enemy know we’re here. We have incoming armour and infantry. Counter-attack with me.’

The Raptors bounded out from their hiding places, following Hef as he scrambled up to a ledge of rock about halfway up the face of the gorge. The lights of the nearest Rhino transport glimmered around a bend in the defile, gleaming from the moon’s rust-and-grey surface.

The carrier appeared, a legionary manning the combi-bolters mounted in a cupola on its top, headlights blazing. Moving slowly, the Rhino nosed around the bend as the gunner tracked left and right with his weapon. A searchlight above the cupola cut back and forth across the jagged rocks where the Raven Guard had been half a minute earlier.

The legionary looked up, swivelling his weapon towards Hef’s hiding place. But he was too late, as the lieutenant leapt down from the rocks, chainsword in one hand, a melta-bomb in the other, and his squad-brothers behind him.

Landing on the hull of the Rhino, Hef smashed a boot into the side of the gunner’s head, crashing it against the open hatch of the cupola. The chainsword roared into life as he slashed it down across the legionary’s exposed neck, lacerating the vulnerable ridged seal and the flesh within. The spray of blood arced slowly from the fatal wound, individual droplets carrying far in the low gravity.

The others landed around Hef, their bolters and melee weapons at the ready. Hef activated the mag-clamp of his melta-bomb and slapped it to the side of the access hatch. The breaching charge detonated, blasting through the Rhino’s armour with ease, and killing the driver below. Other charges set by the rest

of the squad exploded in quick succession, turning the engine into a smoking mass of slag and blowing holes in the transport's roof. The Rhino careened across the gorge for several metres before crashing to a halt against a pillar of rock.

The rear hatch slammed open and a handful of Sons of Horus spilled out, turning their bolters back towards the Raptors. But Hef's warriors were ready, and met them with a hail of bolts and a shot from a plasma gun. The traitors were down in the space of a few heartbeats, without a single shot fired in return.

The Predator and a second Rhino rounded the bend in the canyon. The moment the gunners saw what was happening they opened fire, a storm of autocannon and heavy bolter rounds slamming into the mangled wreck beneath the Raven Guard. Tarbor was struck full in the chest and thrown into the air, where the trace of heavy bolter shots tore his armour apart with a flurry of rapid detonations.

'Down!' yelled Hef. 'Use the wreck as cover!'

The Raven Guard followed their lieutenant to the ground, finding sanctuary behind the smoking remains of the transport. Rock splinters, chips of ceramite and slivers of metal shrapnel showered down after them as the Predator continued its fusillade.

Neroka moved to one edge of the rapidly deteriorating wreckage and looked out. He snapped his head back quickly as a storm of bolts rattled against the hull.

'The other Rhino is moving in on our left. They'll have us flanked in a minute. That's if our cover lasts that long.'

Hef looked back down the gorge, where they had come from. It was several hundred metres of nearly open ground. 'We'll be picked off as soon as we make a move.' He looked up the steep walls of the canyon. 'Too long to make the ascent. It'll be like a firing range for that tank crew.'

'You want to just sit here and wait for the inevitable?'

'I'm thinking. Let me think, for the love of–'

But Hef's thoughts were interrupted again, by the white streak of a lascannon beam from the lip of the gorge above. The energy blast was followed by a huge fireball soaring over the wreck of the Rhino, as the Predator's fuel tanks exploded. Looking up again, Hef saw grey-armoured figures against the gloom.

'Just in time, Hef of the Raptors!' Woundweaver was obvious by his more ostentatious gear - an ornate skull and fang necklace and the dark wolfpelt hanging across his backpack, as well as golden torqs and runes worked into the ceramite of his battleplate. 'Lucky thing we hear your trouble and come for you, eh?'

'*Lucky?*' Hef almost shrieked the word. 'You compromised our position with your stupidity!'

'Huh. There's gratitude for you.'

The Space Wolves took aim again just as the second Rhino came into view, striking the vehicle's track housing on the far side. The Rhino skidded, shedding track links as the lascannon blazed again, the beam slicing neatly through the driver's compartment this time.

'Raptors, attack!' Hef cried, leaping away from the cover of the wreck. He crossed the ground to the other Rhino in a dozen gigantic strides, in time to meet the first Son of Horus as the large firing hatch on the top of the transport opened. Hef's growling chainsword took off the top of the Space Marine's head, the weapon juddering in his hand as it carved through helm and thickened skull with equal ease.

The lieutenant leapt back as bolter fire burst from the open crew compartment. As he landed, the other Raven Guard were charging in, jumping up to the Rhino's roof with their own bolters firing. Kaddian was caught by a burst of burning promethium from a flamer. The fire enveloped him from head to foot as he stumbled across the vehicle's roof, smoke rising from his burning war-plate, coolant and lubricant hissing and steaming as he pitched to the rocky ground.

The firefight around the Rhino was ended with a clutch of grenades thrown into the transport's open top.

Shrapnel and fire filled the interior for a moment, finishing off all within.

Hef looked across to Kaddian's body, the slick of promethium still sheathing him in blue flame. He spared a moment to mourn the passing of another from the First Nine, but his bleak thoughts were interrupted by Woundweaver.

'There's a Land Raider heading your way, you'd best come inside with us.'

'Bring the dead,' Hef said, remembering the mission protocols of his Legion. It seemed likely that the Sons of Horus would assume the Space Wolves had contacted their own reinforcements. It was better, then, that the enemy did not know there was another Legion involved. 'We will avenge them soon enough.'

The heavy inner doors closed behind the group, leaving the Raven Guard and Space Wolves looking at each other across a bare chamber. Beyond Woundweaver's squad, Hef could see two more of their Legion propped up against the wall, obviously wounded, perhaps dead.

Tired of sucking in stale air, Hef unsealed his helm and, without thinking, took it off. The moment he revealed his twisted face, he realised his mistake.

The Wolves raised their guns and the Raptors responded in kind. Woundweaver stepped forwards, pistol in one hand, a power axe in the other.

'This is unexpected, Hef of the Raptors.'

Hef waved a hand at his warriors. 'Lower your weapons!' The lieutenant turned his gaze back to Woundweaver and slowly hung his chainsword on his belt. 'We are not enemies.'

The Space Wolves sergeant looked from one Raven Guard to the next as they reluctantly obeyed Hef's command. 'Are you all like this?'

Neroka took off his helm.

'Not all. It makes no difference, we are all Raptors. We take the rough with the smooth, as we say. All Raven Guard together.'

'Is that so?'

The rest of Hef's contingent followed suit, revealing a mixture of unchanged and malformed faces. Hef reached out to Woundweaver.

'I know what you are thinking, packmaster, but it is not so. We've also seen some of the things our foes have become, but we are different. It is an affliction of the gene-seed. Some of us are changed, some of us aren't – a price to be paid, perhaps, for trying to improve on the Emperor's own design.'

One of the other Space Wolves laughed and pointed at the Raven Guard, speaking in the VI Legion's own guttural Fenrisian. '*Baier eru weregelder, eh?*'

He slung his bolter and took off his own helm. A shaggy mane rolled down across his chest and shoulders, framing a face that was covered in thick hair save for the eyes and mouth. Fangs as long as fingers were revealed as the Space Wolf grinned. His eyes flashed yellow in the harsh lights.

'I did not know the Raven Guard had such warriors, Arvan.'

'Silence, Svarad!' snapped the packmaster. 'We do not discuss with outsiders.'

Hef looked on incredulously as the rest of the handful of Space Wolves removed their helms, revealing faces in greater or lesser degrees of canine-like mutation. Woundweaver's was almost a snout, his hair a mixture of black and grey, his eyes a bright blue.

'We are not beasts, Hef of the Raptors.'

'Nor are we.'

They continued to eye each other suspiciously for a few more seconds, until Hef broke the silence.

'What *are* you doing here?'

'Isn't it obvious? We come here to die.'

Woundweaver despatched his warriors back to their positions, and Hef realised that the five Space Wolves were all that were left. The packmaster led the Raven Guard to an adjoining chamber where ammunition crates and other supplies were stacked. At the Space Wolves' invitation, Hef gestured for his warriors to resupply. He stepped close to Woundweaver so that they could speak with some privacy.

'You think you can hold this place with just a handful of legionaries?'

'Of course not, Hef of the Raptors. But we will hold long enough.'

There was something that Woundweaver wasn't telling him. His explanations didn't entirely make sense. Hef tried another tack. 'What brought you to this system?'

Woundweaver nodded towards the boxes and crates.

'We need more supplies. Many seasons pass since we left Fenris seeking your king. Five years, maybe more.'

'Seeking our king? You mean Lord Corax? What business do you have with the primarch?'

'By decree of Russ and Malcador, we are here to join the Ravenlord and act as guardians, to remind him of oaths sworn and endeavours to be undertaken.'

'He needs no guardians, nor reminders from the likes of you.' Hef regretted the outburst immediately and raised a hand in conciliation. 'He is as loyal as Russ, you can be sure of that.'

'That remains to be seen.' Woundweaver cast an eye at the other Raven Guard, his gaze lingering on those that suffered from the worst deformities. 'I have orders, but your king is a wily one and we cannot find him for many years. Now we hear he is gathering a new army, but we have to come here to the weapons cache first, to ensure we are properly equipped.'

'Equipped to do what?' Hef looked at the supplies and saw that there were several heavy weapons, crates of demolition charges and a large stockpile of ammunition.

Woundweaver met Hef's steady stare without blinking. 'Whatever needs doing.'

Hef eventually conceded, glancing away.

The Space Wolf took in a deep breath. 'The Sons of Horus arrive a few days after us. Maybe coincidence, maybe not. Who can say? We are outmatched but we can still strike a deadly blow. If we lure the traitors to the surface, they will be vulnerable.'

'I don't understand. What has that got to do with leaving your ship?'

'We use ourselves as bait, see? Pretend we are crippled, bring them in close and then detonate the warp drive and take us all to Hel.'

'Something went wrong. The bodies we found...'

Woundweaver looked uncomfortable and turned away as he spoke.

'Five years is a long time, a lot of warp travel, you understand? The *weregeld*, the price of our Legion's superiority, takes its toll.' The packmaster raised a hand to his face. 'A side effect of the *canis helix*, the Emperor's gift to Fenris and her sons. Three of my pack-brothers are consumed, unable to fight the beast within. We subdue them, lock them in the armoury. Think they are too far gone, but they have enough civilisation left in them to remember the melta-bombs.'

The Space Wolf fell silent and Hef could imagine the rest.

'They tried to take the reactor room, didn't they? You had to kill them.'

'It was too soon. But they are driven mad, grief-stricken by their curse.'

'But not you? You came here to die, because you're so *happy* about everything?'

'The fight with the wulfen-skinned is a distraction, and the plan has to change. I send the ship out looking crippled, knowing anyone will trace the course back to this moon. The Sons of Horus do, and they fall into our trap.'

'*Your* trap? You must realised that you're the ones surrounded.'

‘That’s right!’ Woundweaver grinned, baring fangs as long as those he wore around his neck. ‘We bleed those traitors for a bit, and when they’re mad and hungry for blood we let them in. That’s when we fire the reactor.’

It took a few seconds for the packmaster’s words to sink in. Hef’s voice was a whisper.

‘Did you just say you’re going to blow up this base? Detonate the reactor?’

‘Of course, how else do we kill enough Sons of Horus to make it worthwhile?’

‘Why don’t they just eradicate you from orbit?’

Wounderweaver winked. ‘Defence laser outposts. Two of them, Hef of the Raptors. That was the original plan, to blast them out of orbit, but their shields hold and they run away before the auto-lasers recharge. They keep their distance ever since, so now we have the reactor. It has to be this way, to make sure we take as many as we can. They’ve been probing the defences, not committing themselves. I’m afraid they’ll wear us down eventually if we keep fighting the normal way.’

‘Madness. And we’re stuck in here with you…’

‘The Sons of Horus will regret the day they faced us, yes? Those few that survive to spread the saga of this battle.’

‘I think I’d prefer to take my chances with the Sons of Horus. You’re welcome to stay and seek a stupid death if you prefer, but I have a gunship and I plan to leave on it.’

Woundweaver glared at Hef, his brow furrowed with annoyance. The packmaster was about to say something but stopped himself. Then he scratched his bearded chin and dragged his fingers through the thick hair.

‘Hmm. It would be difficult, but it might just work.’

Hef was not sure if Woundweaver was talking to him, or simply muttering to himself. ‘What might work?’

‘We lure in the Sons of Horus before the reactor goes critical and then… No. No, it won’t work. We stay here to be the bait in the trap.’

‘Why not just leave with us? I’m sure we can all make it back to the gunship, if you follow our lead and try not to attract attention.’

‘Leaving Warmaster’s treacherous cowards to go on their way? Russ will be ashamed of such a thing. I cannot let you go, in case you get captured and reveal the plan.’

Hef was about to challenge Woundweaver to explain how he expected to stop the Raven Guard leaving, but decided it was better to take a different approach.

‘There’s a third option. One that kills lots of enemies and doesn’t result in you getting vaporised in a ball of plasma.’

‘I doubt it, but continue, Hef of the Raptors.’

‘I leave with my warriors – I promise you, we *won’t* get caught. We will reach a safe distance and contact my ship. It will disable their vessel and then come into orbit over the station and attack the Sons of Horus. They will have to launch an assault to take the defence lasers if they want to drive us away again. By then, you will have evacuated and set the reactor to detonate.’

The Space Wolf considered this for some time, gauging Hef with narrowed eyes. Eventually he nodded. ‘You swear on your honour that you carry out this attack?’

‘As a true son of Corax, you have my word, packmaster. The Raven Guard have not yet shirked an opportunity to hurt Horus, and we will not do so today.’

‘And the other matter...’ Woundweaver vaguely waved a hand, presumably to indicate the altered nature of Hef and his fellow Raptors. ‘That is set aside for the moment?’

‘Trust me. I swear that together we will destroy these traitors. No other consideration will be made.’

‘Hmm. I am satisfied, and you have my word that we will not abandon the station until the foe are committed to the attack. We will send our location to your ship when we are away from the enemy.’

‘Make whatever preparations you need. It would be well if you could provide some form of distraction to mask our leaving.’

‘Hef of the Raptors – we will cause such a commotion, the enemy will have no eye but for us. The Sons of Horus will feel the bite of our long fangs.’

Woundweaver was good to his word. He gathered his small force and led them to the outer defence line, from where they poured heavy weapons fire into the enemy. Goaded into fresh action by this unexpected counterattack, the Sons of Horus gathered for a determined thrust towards the fortified station.

The Raven Guard departed on the opposite side of the facility, slipping into the shadows as quickly as they were able. Within minutes they were hidden amongst the maze of gorges and spires and moving away fast.

Despite their rapid progress, it was some time before Hef spied the landed gunship. Boarding with Neroka, he posted the others to guard against any pursuing foe – not that there had been any sign that the Raptors had been followed, but precautions were always taken. It was the code of the Raven Guard that they took the enemy unawares but were never themselves surprised.

The lieutenant moved directly to the communication controls and sent a short machine-hail to Devor on board the *Fearless*. A few minutes later he received a series of rapid clicks in response. Any lengthier transmissions ran the risk of being detected by the orbiting Sons of Horus vessel.

‘This is Hef, no further response required. I expect you to carry out these commands precisely. Maintain silent running to ambush Sixteenth Legion vessel. When it has been disabled, confirm by vox and take up position over the combat site. The facility is held by allies – do *not* target the station. Sons of Horus are encircling the facility. They are to be targeted with all capable weapons. An evacuation corridor is to be left free of attack, co-ordinates attached. Continue with saturation bombardment until directly countermanded by ciphered transmission from the ground.’

Hef used a keypad to enter the spatial reference codes for the route out of the station he had agreed with Woundweaver. As long as the Space Wolves kept to that narrow corridor, they would be safe from the bombardment.

Neroka looked at him. ‘And now?’

‘We have to wait. We can’t risk entering the combat zone again. It’s up to Devor and Woundweaver now.’ Hef took a deep breath. ‘What trouble are they going to cause us, do you think?’

‘The Wolves? We can’t just leave them stranded here, brother. What harm can they really do? There’s only five of them, maybe less now.’

‘They might return to Russ and tell him what they’ve seen. We’re not the face of the Legion that Lord Corax wishes to be known.’

‘I’m sure the Wolf King has more important things to worry about at the moment,’ said Neroka.

‘We don’t know that, not for sure. Woundweaver was sent to keep an eye on Lord Corax for a reason. If they don’t aim to respond directly, I would swear that they’ll make trouble some other way.’

‘We’re battle-brothers now. Things I’ve heard, the sons of Fenris are big on honour and oaths. You saw what had become of them. They understand what it’s like to have the bodies of beasts but the hearts of loyal men.’

Hef shrugged as best he was able. ‘Perhaps, but Commander Branne might say otherwise. They’re big on oaths, of course, but it seems that Russ considers himself above certain rules. Always keen to keep others in line, but equally ready with a reason why the Space Wolves are different. You didn’t see the way

Woundweaver looked at us. He hates what we are, but he's trying to hide it.'

Before Neroka could reply, the vox came to life.

'*This is Devor, transmission only. Enemy ship has been destroyed, proceeding to target zone to complete fire mission as ordered.*'

Neroka gave his commander a congratulatory slap on the shoulder pad.

'Well done, lieutenant. It seems that the first part of the plan has succeeded. All we have to do now is rendezvous with the Space Wolves.'

Hef hesitated.

The sky was lit by strobing flashes, and the ground began to quake as the orbital bombardment commenced.

'We are going to pick them up, yes?' said Neroka. 'You gave them your word.'

'I had to. Woundweaver wouldn't have let us out of that place otherwise.'

'An oath is still an oath, Hef.'

'Is it? Does it count if all of those that heard it are dead?'

Neroka's tone became more fierce. '*I* heard it, brother.'

'I could have ordered the station annihilated from orbit, along with the Sons of Horus. Perhaps I should have done.'

'I suppose we could strand them here. Maybe drop them supplies. We'll leave them out of the way until we tell Lord Corax and he figures out what to do with them.'

'No,' said Hef. 'Lord Corax will want to welcome them, as he has all the others that have responded to his call.'

'And why shouldn't he?'

'I just told you – these warriors are different. Woundweaver is acting on orders from Russ himself, and from the Regent of Terra. He is on a mission. He'll see it through to whatever end he thinks necessary. Five or five thousand, if they decide that Lord Corax is acting beyond his authority, then they could destroy everything we've been fighting for.'

Neroka was incredulous. 'You don't really think they would try to hurt the primarch?'

'They might try, and the distraction, the damage to his faith in the cause, could be catastrophic. If he thought Russ and the Wolves were against us, he might lose hope, and that would be a disaster. The weapons in that station could take down a Battle Titan. Why would they need those, sergeant? Tell me. This can't be the only supply depot they have. Over-gunned, protected by anti-orbital weaponry, located in dead systems – why do the Space Wolves have caches of high-powered ordnance hidden across the galaxy?'

Neroka looked at Hef for a long moment, but only shook his head.

'I can't make an argument for something I don't know. It feels wrong, that's all.'

A buzz on the gunship's sensors alerted Hef to a sudden energy surge outside. He donned his helm and sprang down the fuselage to the boarding ramp and looked back to the station. A hemispherical blast of blue and white lightning rose up from beyond the jagged peaks, so bright that Hef's auto-senses cut out for a moment, dulling the input to almost black to prevent the sight blinding him.

When the light filtration ended, the plasma detonation had dissipated to a glittering shell of purples and reds.

'We might get lucky,' said Neroka. 'Perhaps they didn't get away in time.'

Hef was not hopeful, and the vox hissed just as he returned to the cockpit. The joy in Woundweaver's voice carried even over the crackling link.

'*Do you see that, Hef of the Raptors? Like Hel's own fire to consume the traitors, eh? Long will the*

telling of this saga be heard.'

'We'll see you at the rendezvous location, packmaster.' Hef closed the channel and turned to his companion, shaking his head. 'The luck of the Raven Guard.'

'He sounded happy, Hef. I don't think he would speak out against us, but the command lies with you. Your word will be final.'

Hef walked down the ramp of the gunship, feeling as though he carried a crushing weight despite the low gravity. His warriors followed him, fanning out to either side as they reached the rocky ground.

Woundweaver and two other Space Wolves had escaped from the station, which still burned with plasma fire, its glow bright above the ridges and peaks. Occasionally the explosion of another shell from orbit would illuminate the shadows, its detonation punctuating the stillness.

The packmaster had no helm, his breath coming in clouds of vapour. Hef took off his helm too, so that he could face Woundweaver, eye to eye. He stopped about ten metres away from the Space Wolves.

'The enemy are dead,' he said, flatly. 'We have kept our word.'

'So you have. I admit I was having doubts, but you come through.'

'Aye.' Hef drew his chainsword and revved the motor. 'For what it's worth, I'm sorry it has to end this way.'

Woundweaver realised what was happening and threw himself forwards as the other Raven Guard opened fire. Whickering bolts engulfed the two other sons of Fenris, detonations sparking across their armour, throwing out chunks of ruined ceramite.

The packmaster's bolt pistol spat rounds at Hef, a trio of shots smashing into the lieutenant's shoulder and breastplate. Hef ignored the prick of shrapnel piercing his flesh – he was all but inured to any pain these days, above and beyond the tolerance of other legionaries. He counter-charged, sweeping his chainsword towards Woundweaver as the Space Wolf dragged his power axe free.

The gleaming axe head carved through Hef's weapon, scattering half-melted adamantium teeth and chain links. The lieutenant twisted aside, turning with the shock of the blow, and retreated a few steps as Woundweaver's momentum took him past.

The packmaster growled, a feral sound more animal than human. 'I see now you are nothing but monsters.'

'Fenris must lack mirrors.'

'We are the weregeld, the price of greatness! You are lowly savages! The remnants of inglorious meddling by your master!'

The Raptors closed in a tight circle around them, the blood from the corpses of Woundweaver's companions the same colour as the hard rock onto which it spread. The packmaster snarled, glaring at Hef.

'You leave the deed to your minions, worthless scum. You cannot beat me. You lack conviction, just as you lack a weapon.'

'I have both!' Hef roared as he pounced, clearing the gap between them with one leap. His claws erupted from the sealed sheaths that tipped his gauntlets, shining in the glare of the gunship's lights. Woundweaver tried to bring up his axe but Hef was too close, his left hand grabbing the packmaster's wrist while the right carved three bloody furrows across his cheek and forehead.

Woundweaver swayed, using the strength of Hef's assault to turn the lieutenant. In the weak gravity, the two of them left the ground, spinning around each other as though locked together in some bloody dance. They landed and rolled, Hef slamming his claws into his foe's chest while Woundweaver still struggled with the axe.

The Space Wolf kicked out, flinging Hef back a few paces. Eyes now a gleaming blue, threads of saliva drooling from his jaw, Woundweaver pushed himself to his feet. He threw back his head and howled.

Hef did not hesitate, but ploughed into the packmaster shoulder-first, barrelling both of them to the ground again.

Snapping and snarling, the axe pinned beneath Hef's knee, the Space Wolf tried to bite off his face. The lieutenant drove his bony forehead into Woundweaver's snout, breaking bone and teeth. Despite this, the packmaster spat damning words.

'You will be Corax's weregeld, beast! You are his curse, and no good passes while you live. You are creatures of Hel that will be sent back to the dark pit.'

Hef smashed a fist into the Space Wolf's canine face and thrust a claw into his eye. 'I'm sure you'll wait for me...'

Sinking wicked talons into flesh, piercing windpipe and arteries with ease, the lieutenant stood and tore out Woundweaver's throat.

Panting, he stepped away. Sensing the others around him, Hef glared at them as he wiped the blood from his hands. 'No word of this reaches the Legion. None of the Space Wolves survived the traitors' final attack – that is all the others need to know.'

There were nods from the Raptors, and Hef was grateful for their understanding. He glanced back at the dead Space Wolves.

'Guessing is for gamblers. We can't afford to take chances.'

Arvan Woundweaver lashes out at the Raven Guard

WEREGELD

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Primarchs

CORVUS CORAX, The Ravenlord, the Saviour of Deliverance
LEMAN RUSS, The Wolf King, the Lord of Winter and War

Followers of the Ravenlord

AGAPITO NEV, Commander of the Talons
BRANNE NEV, Commander of the Raptors
SOUKHOUNOU, Commander of the Hawks
ALONI TEV, Commander of the Falcons
GHERITH ARENDI, Commander of the Black Guard, former Shadow Warden

CHOVANI, Sergeant, Talons
CORBYK, Talon
GAL, Talon
VANDA, Talon
HENN, Thunderhawk pilot, Talons

NAVAR HEF, Lieutenant, Raptors
XANDA NEROKA, Lieutenant, Raptors
DEVOR, Raptor
KANNAK, Raptor
DRAYK, Raptor
GARBA, Raptor
VOLB, Raptor
FANNAS, Raptor
SANNAD, Raptor
KELPEL, Raptor

GHELT, Chooser of the Slain, Dark Fury assault squad
KORIN, Mor Deythan
SHRAY CHAVYON, Provisional lieutenant, Black Guard

Balsar Kurthuri, Chief Librarian of the XIX Legion
Syth Arriax, Librarian
Fara Tex, Librarian

Noriz, Captain, VII Legion
Annovuldi, Warsmith, IV Legion
Kasati Nuon, Battle-brother, VIII Legion
Kardozia, Dreadnought, Iron Father of the X Legion

Arcatus Vindix Centurio, Legio Custodes

Nasturi Ephrenia, Strategium controller of the battle-barge *Avenger*
Connra Deakon, Astropath, *Avenger*

Elvvix Jasson, Watch-captain, *Shadowed Guardian*
Fasuusi, Navigator, *Shadowed Guardian*

Khira, Captain, legionary commander of the *Providence*
Vabus, Lieutenant, legionary commander of the *Revenant*

Marcus Valerius, Vice-Caesari of the Therion Cohort
Pelon, Tribune

Theuril, Mechanicum magos

Warriors of the Rout

Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, Wolf Lord of Tra
Amlodhi Skarssen, Wolf Lord of Fyf
Sturgard Joriksson, Wolf Lord of Tra-Tra
Oki, Called *Scarred*, Wolf Lord of Tolv

Rathvin, Former watch-pack leader
Bjorn, Called *Fell-handed*, pack leader

Enemies of the Imperium

Horus Lupercal, Warmaster, arch-traitor, Primarch of the Sons of Horus
Ezekyle Abaddon, First Captain, commander of the Justaerin

ALPHARIUS, Lord of Serpents, Primarch of the Alpha Legion

DELERAX, Lieutenant commander, World Eaters

PROLOGUE

The sound of Corax's footsteps resounded along the plain stone walls of the corridor.

Above him, Deliverance was almost deserted. It would take many more years to rebuild the strength of the Raven Guard, but his successors had that task in hand. They had been warned not to look to him for leadership any longer. They would forge their own futures – not just Raven Guard, but Raptors, Black Guard, and all the others who had yet to choose their names.

A new age, a new order.

Guilliman had, as always, been the best prepared for what had come after.

What *needed* to come after.

There was little enough left for Corax to fight for. Fragile hope had given way to desperation, before nihilism and then vengeance had carried him through the following years. Now he was empty, his father dead, his brothers...

He did not want to think about his brothers.

His strides were laboured. The burden that weighed him down was greater than any physical load. It was only determination that carried him along – or perhaps stubbornness; it was impossible to separate the two feelings now. Righteousness had always played second part to humility in the Ravenlord and, now that it had gone, all that was left was a vague pragmatism.

This was a task that needed to be carried out, no matter how awful, no matter the significance for himself.

So Corax had come here, to the Red Level. A place that had given the prisoners of Lycaeus nightmares. The torture cells, the haunt of the most depraved guards and the scene of such exploitation and degradation that it had seemed almost incredible, at least until the excesses perpetrated by Fulgrim and his decadent Legion had eclipsed all else.

Here, Corax had buried his shame, hidden those too far gone even for a clean death on the battlefields of the Scouring.

The solution was clear to him.

He had known it for a long time, but he could not convince others of its truth.

The Imperium did not need his ilk. The galaxy was changed forever, and mortal men were best left to run their own affairs. If they were to fail then it would be by their own mistakes.

Nevermore would they be the pawns of flawed demigods.
There was only one task left to him to complete.

ONE

It was quicker for Hef to take the stairs on all fours, using the leverage of his long arms to clear each flight with two leaps. He rebounded around each landing, his momentum carrying him up the next set of steps. Behind him more Raptors tried to keep up; some of them laboured under their deformities.

He could smell the Night Lords on the upper decks – the scent brought out an unstoppable desire to kill. Hef tried to justify it as a righteous hatred of his wicked foes, but he knew that it was far more primal in origin. Some had been wounded earlier in the boarding action and their blood had brought forth the animal instinct of a predator.

As he reached the command deck a hail of bolts greeted him, cracked armour and ripped chunks from his altered flesh. He ignored the blood that streamed from his injuries and ran along the short corridor. The Night Lords, seven of them, retreated quickly, but not so swiftly that they reached the sanctuary of the main bridge before Hef caught them. He leapt the last three metres, and his unsheathed claws speared into the closest as though his war-plate were made of synth-leather.

A chainsword bit into his shoulder, the first blow that registered anything like pain. Snarling, Hef threw out a clawed hand and tore the faceplate from his attacker. The Night Lord reeled back just as the other Raptors caught up with Hef. Garba, the first, felled the wounded Night Lord with a well-placed knife blow, the deadly blade wielded in his prehensile tail.

Kannak barrelled into the traitors at full speed; the jutting spines and armoured ridges that covered most of his body turned him into a living battering ram. Scaled green skin nearly luminescent in the ship's combat lighting, Volb followed close behind.

A close-range bolter shot caught Hef in the side of the head. The round glanced from his skull to explode a few centimetres away. The detonation ripped open skin but thankfully penetrated no deeper. Hef stumbled sideways, stunned by the concussive blast so close to his ear.

The bark of fire and rasp of chain weapons rang oddly to Hef. Still dizzy, he retreated a few paces and allowed his brothers to push on without him. They secured the main bridge door over the bodies of the remaining Night Lords, though the corpses of two Raptors spilled thick blood across the decking among the fallen traitors.

Two more dead. Hef updated his mental tally. Three hundred and twenty-four Raptors remained.

'*Engines secured, lieutenant*,' Neroka reported over the comm-device that had been riveted into place

over Hef's ear and jaw. '*Human crew, a couple of renegade tech-priests. All dead, as ordered. We lost Fannas and Kelpel.*'

Three hundred and twenty-two. Hef couldn't remember why he had started counting, only that it seemed important now. The tally had started at four hundred and eleven.

'Finish your lower deck sweep,' the lieutenant growled, taking his time to form the words properly with his misshapen mouth. 'We have the command deck.'

'Lieutenant!' Devor's shout from beyond the door brought Hef quickly into the bridge. He found his old friend standing beside one of the communications positions. Its servitor was decapitated, the head still hanging from the cables that attached it to the console. The other half-men had also been destroyed, their chests ripped out or skulls caved in.

'They did this before we boarded,' said Devor. 'They really didn't want us examining the servitor cores.'

'Too long dead for taste-memory too,' added Kannak. The Raptor stood in the centre of the command chamber to ensure none of his long spines caught on the servitor corpses. 'I think they did this the moment we started overhauling them.'

Hef activated the manual display of the comm-feed. The last contact had been three weeks earlier. So had the one before that. The message source and destination was different for both. Examining the previous logs, it was obvious that a great deal of communications traffic had passed through the ship.

'I count at least four separate Night Lords vessels in-system with this ship before its last translation,' Hef told the others. He continued scrolling through the log. 'Five. Six. Six ships. With this one, that makes seven traitor vessels in one place. That can't be good news.'

'They must have done this to stop us finding out where they were going,' said Devor.

Hef activated the ship's internal vox.

'Neroka, do you have Magos Theuril with you?'

'*Yes, lieutenant. She is stabilising the engine core. I think the Night Lords tried to scuttle the ship but we got here first.*'

'Have her access the Geller field generator records. I want to know how long this ship was in warp space last jump.'

'I have something here,' said Drayk from beside the navigation position. The screen's glow glinted on the tusks that jutted from his malformed jaw. 'The results of the post-translation scan. They arrived here to the galactic north-west of the standard orbital plane.'

'Bring up a chart,' said Hef, crossing to join Drayk. The display rippled with a star field and then zoomed in, centring on their current position in the Sellacis System. The lieutenant's claws prevented him from manipulating the display himself and he gestured for Drayk to continue with the controls. 'Slide back along their axis of arrival.'

Drayk did so as they waited for Theuril's report. Hef tapped his claws on the brushed steel console. A few minutes later Neroka contacted Hef.

'*Lieutenant, the Magos says that the ship was in warp for thirteen or fourteen days.*'

'Thank you, Neroka.'

'*But she said it made four short jumps previous to that. It reminded her of an intersystem shuttle run. Two hundred and eight hours each way, every time give or take a couple of hours.*'

'A warp channel. Or stable beacon.'

'*A channel in these storms? Has to be a beacon, I think.*'

Hef flicked an impatient claw, indicating for Drayk to move the display the equivalent of seventy-five light years back towards the ship's assumed point of origin.

‘There!’ He jabbed a claw at the screen. ‘Oddyssian System. Seventy-one light years from here. It has an Old Night beacon – that would explain the short jumps.’

Drayk spooled the control wheel to enlarge the view to include the nearby systems. ‘Damn...’

‘What?’

The other Raptor traced a line with his gauntlet, linking the Oddyssian star with another. ‘There’s only one system within eight and a half days. It’s Dexius.’

‘Dexius?’ said Devor. ‘Where Lord Corax is mustering the Legion?’

A flush of apprehension ran through Hef as he absorbed this information. He keyed his vox to open a full-channel transmission.

‘All units, abandon sweep. We are returning to the *Fearless* immediately.’ He cut the link and looked at his companions. ‘We need to warn the primarch. The Night Lords are going to attack Dexius.’

Agapito paced back and forth across the bridge of the *Shadowed Guardian*, but the commander of the Talons did not take his eyes from the main screen. The ship that had entered the system four days ago was little more than a brighter spark against the stars. It was a warship, but only a small escort. Even so, its presence was as welcome as a seal leak in an enviro-dome.

‘Hail them again,’ he snapped at his communications technician. ‘Make it clear that we will open fire if they raise their shields or power their weapons.’

The attendant nodded and spoke into the pick-up of his console.

‘Unidentified vessel, this is the battle-barge *Shadowed Guardian* of the Raven Guard Legion. You have entered void space of the Dexius System, currently under our aegis. Maintain course and do not raise power to any defensive or offensive systems. Identify yourselves immediately or be boarded.’

Static hissed in reply.

‘We’re going aboard,’ the commander told his subordinates. ‘Duty guard report to the starboard flight bay. Prepare a Thunderhawk for launch.’

‘Just five squads, commander?’ The watch captain, an unaugmented human called Elvvix Jasson, cocked his head in a gesture of unease. He smoothed his hands down his black uniform coat. ‘It may only be a frigate but it could house twice that number of traitors, commander.’

‘When you are triggering a trap, you only put in your finger, not your whole hand,’ said Agapito. ‘Any sign of trouble and we’ll withdraw and annihilate the ship from here.’

‘Beg your pardon, commander, but why not simply annihilate it right now?’

‘Intelligence. We need to find where it’s been. Also, we need every ship we can get. It could be abandoned, dumped here by the warp. Or a skeleton crew. Comms could have been destroyed.’

‘Of course, commander. I meant no insubordination.’

‘I know, Jasson. Being cautious, yes? Nothing wrong with that.’

Agapito accepted the watch captain’s salute with a nod and strode towards the main bridge doors. As he headed down the decks to the flight bay he unhooked his helmet from his belt. Before he put it on he ran the tip of a gauntleted finger across it, tracing the faint crack that ran from the top to just above the right eye lens. Most of his armour had been replaced over the last few years, but the helmet had stayed true, the same he had worn on the day that they had dropped into the Urgall Depression on Isstvan.

He remembered the moment the shell had exploded. A piece of shrapnel the size of his fist had struck his helm from the airburst. Other pieces of jagged metal had cut down two of his fellow Raven Guard to each side, just a couple of metres away.

With his eyes closed, the oily scent of the conveyor became the smell of blood. The rattle of the chains turned into the chatter of bolters; the buzz of the lumen globe became the hiss of las-blasts.

Agapito swallowed hard, not trying to fight the memories, welcoming them. The cries of the dying were a war song in his thoughts. The thunder of traitor guns was the beat of the drum to which he marched into battle.

With a creak and a bang the conveyor arrived at its destination. Agapito's eyes flicked open, bringing him back to the present.

The doors opened. The commander stood for a moment longer, jaw clenched, eyes narrowed. Taking a breath, he put on his helmet and stepped out.

From just a few hundred metres away it was clear the ship had seen a lot of battle. Its hull was heavily scarred, some of the damage so recent that it hadn't been repaired, leaving gaping rents in its flank. The engines were working, spitting fitful bursts of plasma. Its trajectory was slightly curving; the ship rolled slowly about its prow-stern axis, doubtless a consequence of its unorthodox exit from warp space within the boundary of the Mandeville point.

The lamps of the Thunderhawk played over a stretch of the hull, illuminating plasma burns and large, pale patches of what Agapito knew to be ferrofoam. The close-range auspexes returned only minimal details – residual life signs perhaps, but almost impossible to distinguish from the nascent energies of the plasma reactor and environmental systems.

'Could be someone aboard,' said Vanda, examining the gunship's scanning system.

'Servitors, vermin, any number of things could still be alive on there without crew,' replied Agapito.

'Commander!' The call from the pilot, Henn, drew their attention through the main canopy. He had lamps fixed on a particular stretch of the frigate's prow. 'Not quite so unidentified now.'

The lights showed up a circle of dark blue along the side of the beak-shaped ram. Upon it was a much faded Legion symbol: a winged skull.

'Night Lords,' growled Agapito.

The atmosphere in the cockpit grew even tenser. Agapito glared out of the canopy, fists on the console in front.

'Trust nothing,' he said. He glanced at Vanda's screen. 'Reactor in nominal mode, no chance of an overload.'

'We should just go back and destroy it from the ship,' said Vanda. 'It has to be a trap, and we don't need a frigate that badly.'

Inside his helm Agapito ground his teeth.

'Nothing is what it seems with the Night Lords,' warned Henn. 'I concur with Vanda.'

Agapito turned his attention to the two other legionaries in the cockpit.

'Did I ask for a vote?' he growled. The two Raven Guard bowed their heads in silent apology. 'But you are right. Henn, take us back to the battle-barge.'

The Night Lords frigate seemed to slide from view as the gunship turned away. A few seconds passed and then the cockpit displays blazed into life, scanner warnings flickering like celebration lights.

'*Commander, we are detecting rapid energy surge*,' reported Jasson over the vox.

'We're being targeted,' added Vanda. 'Point defence turrets activating!'

Henn pushed the gunship into a rolling dive while automatic countermeasures ejected scanner-baffling clouds of metal filaments and flares behind the accelerating Thunderhawk.

'*Shadowed Guardian*, open fire!' Agapito snapped across the vox.

'*Commander, the blast could–*'

The commander's voice rose to a shout. 'Blow it out of the stars!'

Klaxons blared as the frigate's augurs locked onto the jinking gunship; the moan of the sensor warning

rose to a wail. A second later Vanda cursed.

'Rockets launched,' he said. 'A score of them full cluster. Thirteen seconds to impact. Cannon rangefinder arrays have locked on.'

Ahead, the bright dot that was the battle-barge flared into an orange star for a moment. A second later trails of plasma silently seared towards the corkscrewing Thunderhawk. The closest passed within a dozen metres. More warning lights and sirens sparked into life from the proximity of the energy blasts.

'Multiple impacts, no void shields active,' Vanda remarked, his fingers moving quickly across the runepad of the scanners.

'Straight and fast!' Agapito snapped at his pilot. Henn did as ordered, pulling the Thunderhawk from its evasive rolls into a direct course away from the enemy frigate, jets leaving blue trails as it powered across the void.

A salvo of missiles from the Raven Guard ship followed eight seconds after the plasma volley, thankfully some distance away from the still-accelerating gunship. Agapito pulled himself out of his harness and floated across the cockpit to the main gunnery array. He activated the lascannon and turned its feed-link to the stern to look back at the Night Lords ship.

The frigate was aflame from midships to prow; plasma and burning gas licked along its ruptured plates like ripples of iridescent oil. The whine from the targeting detectors had fallen silent, the incoming missiles swallowed by the wave of fire from the *Shadowed Guardian*. Letting out a long breath, Agapito pulled himself back to his seat. As he dragged on the harness, the vox-link to the *Shadowed Guardian* crackled into life.

'*Commander, we are detecting multiple signals at the Mandeville boundary.*'

'More ships? Speed, direction?'

'*Coming straight for us. Six ships so far. Navigator Fasuusi thinks there are at least four more about to break through.*'

'Damn,' muttered Agapito. 'The ship was the trap, after all. Just not the one we were expecting.'

The first reports were understandably fractured. From first impression it might have seemed plausible that the Night Lords had come across Corax's rally system by accident. An hour after the initial warp breaches had been detected and the scale of the incursion had grown to thirteen enemy ships, half of them warships of the line and the rest heavy transports, that theory had been proven terribly false. Aboard the *Avenger*, his occasional flagship, the primarch had to concede the inevitable.

Branne, the commander of the Raptors company, was talking with Strategium Controller Ephrenia, discussing the continuing emergence of enemy ships. They fell silent as Corax approached.

'This is a deliberate attempt to wipe us out.' The primarch grimaced and turned his gaze from the screens to address his subordinates. 'Look at their dispositions. Directly across the shortest route to the Mandeville boundary.'

'And I'd bet my bolter as soon as we start moving the other way, some more ships are going to come in-system ahead of us,' replied Branne. 'They're trying to flush us like game birds.'

'We need to scatter.' Branne looked horrified at Corax's assessment, but the primarch cut off any protest before it could be voiced. 'We are outclassed.'

'We have time to call in more ships,' suggested Ephrenia. 'There are patrols in the neighbouring systems.'

'Are there? Have we heard from them recently?'

Branne stepped back and sucked in a deep breath.

'The Night Lords couldn't possibly...' He fell quiet, expression dark as the possibilities hit home. 'How

did we miss them?'

'More to the point, how did they find us? I assume all of our ships followed proper jump security protocols. Nobody led them back here.'

'And now, right now, when we are waiting for the victualling fleet from Essiry.'

'Ah, of course. The supply convoy. Perhaps our security leak might be traced there.'

'Why would the Essiryans betray us? We saved them from a Word Bearers invasion.'

'Exactly, and where Lorgar's minions are found so are his lies.' Corax rubbed his forehead, agitated at the turn of events. 'It only takes a handful of discontents to manufacture a betrayal, Branne. Someone that sought to profit from Horus's patronage, perhaps.'

'I suppose conjecture is pointless now,' said Branne. 'But we can still fight. If they think they can herd us like docile grox to the slaughter, we'll offend them. One concerted strike, directly towards their main fleet. Let's see if they have the stomach for a proper battle.'

'I have not,' Corax said quietly. His pronouncement stunned Branne for a second time. 'At least, not here, not now. We are unprepared, under-strength and short of supplies.'

'And that is what our enemies expect. They think we are weak. We will prove them wrong.'

'We will not,' Corax whispered. He looked at the legionaries and auxiliaries in the strategium chamber and kept his voice low. 'I have not carefully marshalled our strength since Isstvan to throw it away in a gesture of pointless defiance. We may not be as weak as some think, but we *are* weak. We have been since these faithless traitors turned their guns on us.'

The primarch saw disappointment in Branne's expression, read the desire to argue further in his eyes. Ephrenia's expression was guarded but he saw agreement. It was useful to have a touchstone like her. Brave, clever, but unaugmented. Mortal.

A human perspective. The corners of her mouth were turned down slightly, her jaw tight. She would say nothing, but she was worried. And she had cause to be.

'This is not a battle we can win.' He could still picture Branne as the headstrong teenager that had been at the forefront of the revolt on Deliverance. The Raven Guard were Corax's gene-sons, but some of them, like Branne, were akin to his brothers. He laid a hand on the commander's shoulder. 'There may come a day when we have no option, when the battle itself, the chance to fight, is the only victory we seek. Not today.'

'Where do we run?' asked Branne, resignation in his voice. 'Our scouting patrols and the Librarians are reporting that more and more traitors are entering the surrounding sectors. The Warmaster moves his forces into the Segmentum Solar.'

'It is true. There is a gathering, a growing momentum. We are reaching a tipping point, the moment of decision.' Corax looked away to stare at nothing in particular. In his mind's eyes he pictured the star map extending a few hundred light years around Dexius. 'Horus is going to assault Earth. He must strike soon. We've seen his forces scattering, dissipating, commanders going rogue, planets slipping from his grasp with the lightest of encouragement. I think he knows that he must make his push now or lose the opportunity forever.'

'So, we return to Terra.' Branne's smile was more wry than humoured. 'It is time to stand upon a wall with the sons of Dorn and meet the traitors head-on.'

'Not so, commander.'

Corax moved to his command throne and activated one of the controls. A three-dimensional representation of the surrounding sectors glittered into life. He manipulated the hololith, its scope expanding as though the observer drew a few thousand light years further away.

'The Navigators have reported a decrease in the warp storms and the Librarians say that it is as if a tide

has shifted. I think it will be possible to break out from under the weight of Horus' incoming fleets and move behind them.'

'We continue the guerrilla war?'

'You sound doubtful, commander.'

'If Horus is going to press for Terra, I don't think he is going to care about the systems he leaves behind. The Imperial Palace is the prize. Once he has it he can reclaim as many worlds as he wants. A second and much darker crusade...'

'If we were to continue as we were, that would be true. But we will not. I will reassemble the Legion in full, and such auxilia as remain to be drawn to my banner. A fighting force that must still be contended against.' Corax stroked his chin, contemplating the idea. 'We'll find the Warmaster himself. Stay close to his Legion all the way to the Solar System. Horus won't be able to ignore a dagger aimed directly at his back.'

Branne nodded, his eyes filled with a fresh enthusiasm.

'How do we extricate ourselves from the Night Lords?' asked Ephrenia, always concerned with the practical nature of war. 'Reflex shields and silent running, my lord?'

'No, I do not think that will work this time. They found us here, they may well already know our disposition in detail. We need to scatter the fleet, draw the enemy in all directions.'

'And where do we rendezvous, my lord?' she asked.

Corax considered the void schematic, lips pursed. A long, pale finger pierced the hololith light to indicate a system.

'Rosario?' Branne frowned. 'A waste-hole. There's virtually nothing there. Some disaster with an alien species rendered it almost lifeless.'

'Exactly,' replied the primarch. 'I want astropaths and Librarians broadcasting cipher nav-codes immediately. Be sure they also dedicate some messages for the Therions to pick up. Despatch standard protocol evasion orders to the fleet.'

'Attack, withdraw, attack again, my lord?'

'Something like that, Branne. Something like that.'

The thunder of the *Shadowed Guardian*'s guns died away, leaving the bridge comparatively still. Agapito took a moment to appreciate the quiet while the scanner team assessed the damage from the salvo. They were less than half a day from a safe warp translation, one of the last Raven Guard vessels not to have reached the Mandeville point. The Night Lords strike cruiser had sacrificed itself – there was no chance of it taking down the much larger battle-barge – but perhaps its commander had hoped to damage the engines or otherwise stall the *Shadowed Guardian* for other pursuing forces.

'Enemy ship has been breached, commander,' reported the senior scanner operator. 'Void shields non-functional. Weapon systems non-functional. Navigation compromised.'

'They're crippled, commander, no longer a threat,' said Jasson, as though this needed pointing out. Agapito shook his head.

'No longer a threat? It seems likely the Night Lords have taken one of our victualling convoys – we've just abandoned docking facilities for a score of ships. Two weeks maximum, and this strike cruiser will be in action again.'

The whine of power armour told Agapito of Captain Chovani's approach. The newly promoted officer motioned for Jasson to give him some time with their superior.

'We are trying to escape, aren't we?' the captain asked. 'Those were the lord primarch's orders.'

'There's not another ship between us and the outer system,' Agapito replied. 'The nearest pursuit is two

hours behind us. We can spare a little time.'

'To blast the ship to pieces?'

'Our supplies are low, captain,' Agapito said with a solemn shake of the head. 'I do not think it wise to expend more torpedoes or shells here.'

'No bombardment?'

'We'll board. I want to see if we can find out where these Night Lords sprang from. This is a considerable fleet, but for three years we've seen nothing more than one or two ships from Curze's Legion. Why have they turned up all of a sudden? Are you not curious?'

Chovani's silence answered for him.

'The problem with bombardment, captain, is that it is inefficient. Massive expenditure of ordnance and still no guarantee that there are no survivors. I think it is our duty to ensure that not one of them survives to continue the fight against the Emperor.' Agapito leaned closer. 'Remember Isstvan, brother. Remember whose colours were at the forefront of the ambush. It may have been the guns of the Iron Warriors that fired first, but it was the Night Lords and Word Bearers that plunged in the blade.'

The captain's brow furrowed to a fierce scowl at the thought.

'We have seven suits of Tactical Dreadnought armour still operational, captain,' Agapito continued. 'I assume the teleporters are still working. Would you like to pay the treacherous sons of Nostramo a visit? Maybe ask them some awkward questions?'

Chovani nodded his agreement. Agapito signalled for Jasson to assume control of the bridge. He led his fellow Raven Guard down to the armoury and called for his command squad to assemble there.

As he and the others stripped out of their regular war-plate and, with the assistance of the techmarines and their attendants, donned the much heavier-gauge Terminator armour, the commander set a countdown timer into his suit's chronometer. By the time they were fully geared up, weapons loaded, and on the teleporter grid they would have forty-one minutes before the pursuing flotilla of Night Lords was in range of the *Shadowed Guardian*.

'Bridge, confirm teleporter homer lock.'

It took several seconds for Jasson to ascertain the strength of the beacon signals for the Terminator suits.

'*Homing signal lock confirmed, commander.*'

'Automatic retrieval in thirty minutes, watch captain. We'll not let the Night Lords get too close.'

'*Affirmative, commander. Engines and navigation will be on full standby for your return.*'

Agapito did a last check with his companions, ensuring their integrated surveyor systems were operating properly. Assured that their suits were in fully functioning order, he gave the command to the tech-priests at the teleport controls.

The whine of the generators grew to piercing pitch, and the flash of artificial lightning surged across the generator columns. Sparks of power oscillated up and down each armoured warrior, the frequency building over several seconds until each was engulfed head to foot in a curtain of golden light.

The deck of the *Shadowed Guardian* disappeared.

For a timeless instant Agapito was exposed to the incongruous immaterium, utterly divorced from reality and conventional space-time. Subjective experience lasted a few seconds – *a few seconds in which Agapito's thoughts clustered with the roar of traitor batteries and the crack of splitting ceramite as the opening cannonade of the Iron Warriors fell upon the companies of the XIX Legion…*

The fleeting feeling that occupied him as a dimly lit corridor resolved into focus around him was of confusion – a momentary bafflement that he could not remember anything from before the Dropsite Massacre.

More immediate concerns shunted that revelation to the back of his mind when a bolt-shell exploded

against his left shoulder.

He turned and fired without conscious thought. The two barrels of his combi-bolter spat a hail of rounds at the midnight-blue armour of the Night Lord who had happened upon the boarding team, detonations wracking the traitor's plate from hip to gorget. A moment later the fire of two more Terminators tore at the ceramite, obliterating the plastron and turning the Space Marine within to bloody gobbets.

Agapito smiled.

'With me. Punishment is due.'

They headed in the direction of the command deck. Tactical data placed them somewhere amidships, about three levels below the bridge. Gangly, starved humans in filthy rags with whip-scourged flesh fled before their advance.

'Hold your fire,' Agapito told his warriors. 'These are slaves, not slavers.'

They pushed on towards the prow, unopposed, reaching the central access way that ran most of the ship's length. As they did so, Agapito noticed movement on the upper floor of the main arterial corridor. Floods of unaugmented humans, many of them not much older than children, streamed along the walkways and mezzanines. The pattering of naked feet and drum of boots disappeared towards the stern, away from the command bridge and, Agapito assumed, the rulers of the vessel.

'What do they know that we don't?' joked Corbyk.

Agapito said nothing, having come to the same conclusion but without mirth.

'Scanners to maximum. Anything comes near, kill it, slave or not.' The commander switched his vox-channel to signal the *Shadowed Guardian*. 'Confirm teleport recall signal.'

'*Still clear, commander. No interference. We can you bring you back instantly.*'

'I want an active scan, precision burst directed at the command bridge area.'

'*Understood. Directing the surveyors and compiling data will take approximately one hundred and twenty seconds.*'

'Yes, just do it.'

They continued their advance, the lamps of their suits shining bright beams through the murk of the ship's gloomy belly. They did not veer from their course, but looking into some of the adjacent chambers – magazines, storerooms and dorms for the most part – they found a lot of detritus and graffiti. Agapito had thought the poor lighting was some kind of energy conservation measure but the entire ship was in disrepair. Maintenance was clearly poor, with exposed cabling, broken lighting and intermittent atmospheric cleansers in several halls and corridors. The decks were rusting from lack of care and the bulkhead paint was peeled down to the bare metal and plasteel in many places.

Agapito checked the chronometer. They had eighteen minutes remaining before the automatic teleport would take them back to the battle-barge.

'We don't have time to clear the upper decks,' he told the others. 'We'll head directly to the bridge.'

'Access steps, quadrant four,' replied Corbyk. 'I wouldn't trust the conveyors, not with the state of everything else.'

'Good point. We'll take the stairs.'

The stairwell was made of solid ferrocrete, reinforced with a mesh of plasteel, strong enough to hold the weight of the Terminators – a benefit of boarding a Legiones Astartes ship. They had ascended two flights to the deck above when Jasson's voice cut through the background hiss of the long-range vox.

'*No concentration of personnel, or force. Minimal readings from your objective, commander.*'

'Minimal readings? What does that mean, watch captain?'

'*Just background energy signature from the vessel itself, commander. I would say the bridge is*

inactive, if anything. There should be some kind of blip on one of the scales – vox-traffic, energy grid, life signals from the servitors. Nothing, commander, just the background noise of the ship systems.'

'I hate Night Lords,' muttered Chovani. 'Cowards, all of them.'

'At least Word Bearers just fight you,' added Corbyk. 'That's the sort of despotic traitor I can admire.'

'Focus, all of you,' growled Agapito. 'Jasson, you keep monitoring the surveyors. Anything spikes, anything looking like a reactor surge, any dip in beacon quality, you teleport us straight back.'

'*Yes, commander.*' Jasson did his best not to sound too put upon. '*We'll be monitoring for any threat.*'

The stairwell was completely dark. The steps were heavily tarnished and a brief olfactory analysis confirmed the presence of dried blood.

'Here,' said Gal, his power fist pointing at a line of deep holes in the plastered wall. 'Bolt impacts.'

'We're not the first friends to come calling,' said Corbyk.

Their sensors flared with a renewed energy source a moment before Agapito heard boots on the steps above. A second later the walls echoed with metallic rings, their source revealed as several grenades bounded down the steps from the landing above.

'Frag charges,' Agapito said dismissively, recognising the pattern of the grenades. He continued up two steps before the grenades detonated with three successive cracks, the noise magnified by the confined space. Fire and shrapnel engulfed the massive greaves of his Tactical Dreadnought suit. The blast scratched and burned the black paint and gilding, but did no actual damage to the heavy gauge layered ceramite and adamantium.

'Gal! Take the lead.'

The commander stepped aside as best he could, turning so that the heavy-flamer-armed legionary could fit past on the steps. Reaching the mid-flight turn, Gal raised his weapon and unleashed a burst of burning promethium around the corner, the wave of flame filling the space beyond.

Agapito pushed into the still-burning residue, armour capable of operating in magma vaults more than enough protection against the heat. Through the haze he saw two Night Lords, one of them slapping at a burning slick of promethium on the backpack of the other.

He burst from the flames at full speed, the elongated claws of his left gauntlet already in motion. The closest Night Lord had time only to half turn before the crackling fist connected with the side of his helmet. Ceramite and skull snapped apart at the touch of the gleaming energy field, component atoms scattered by the disruptive effect of the lightning claw.

The second traitor ducked beneath the swing, bringing up his bolter to fire a long burst into Agapito's chest even as the commander's momentum carried him directly into the Night Lord. Agapito stumbled as the traitor fell. The Night Lord's leg armour buckled beneath the weight of the Terminator war-plate. Agapito's second stride landed on the traitor's arm and crushed the elbow into the edge of the reinforced ferrocrete step, messily severing the limb.

He turned, weight grinding the remains of the Night Lord's arm to splinters of ceramite and mashed flesh, tearing forth a drawn-out bellow of pain, until Agapito dropped to one knee to drive the points of two claws through the eye lenses of the traitor. Sparks scattered like embers on a breeze when the claws speared from the back of the Night Lord's head and earthed through the step.

The squad regrouped at the next landing, one deck below the bridge entrance. Another quick consultation with the *Shadowed Guardian* confirmed that there were no new readings of note from the command chamber.

'We hit hard, we hit first and last,' Agapito told his warriors as they ascended the final flight of steps.

The stair brought them into an access passage about ten metres wide, some thirty metres from the armoured gate of the main bridge access. The portal was closed, an immense single plate that had been

dropped across the doorway.

'This might take a moment,' said Corbyk. He hefted his thunder hammer meaningfully as he advanced. 'Watch my back.'

He was a few strides from the portal, the others following close behind, when a hydraulic hiss resounded down the corridor. Gears rumbled in the depth of the wall and the portal rose up to reveal a hellish ruddy glow streaming from the interior of the main bridge. A crimson fog billowed around the Terminators, its touch registering freezing cold on their sensors.

They stood looking at the open gateway, weapons at the ready. No enemy emerged, and sensors detected no movement within the bridge.

'Are we supposed to just step inside?' asked Gal.

'I *really* hate Night Lords,' Chovani muttered.

Agapito forged forward, determined to show no fear.

'Let's end this.'

The red glow permeated the shifting cloud, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere when Agapito crossed the threshold. After two more paces he saw that in fact the ruddy aura came from nothing more unnatural than the console screens of several abandoned stations. Armoured figures lay slumped at each position.

The clumps of the others' footfalls were muted as they followed, and the squad spread out to fill the twenty-metre broad semi-circular area at the centre of the command deck. Above was a small mezzanine shrouded with darkness. Steps descended into horseshoe-shaped sub-levels to the left and right, lit by fitful green flickering from malfunctioning displays. Here too the servitors had been removed and several key systems were monitored by legionaries, their armour leaning awkwardly where they had fallen.

'What killed them?' asked Corbyk as he approached the closest.

'This is wrong,' said Gal, panning his suit lamps through the murk.

'Oh really?' Corbyk replied sarcastically.

'Look at them!' insisted Gal.

Agapito examined the armoured forms. In the pale light of Gal's lamps he saw that the war-plate was not dark blue as he had thought, but lighter in colour. As the Raven Guard played the beam of his lights onward he revealed a symbol on the closest body's shoulder pad – an inverted omega on a white circle.

'Ultramarines?' whispered Agapito. 'How did they...? What are they doing here?'

Corbyk reached out and moved a corpse. At least, he attempted to. At his touch, rather than falling away from his hand, it wobbled slightly and then turned.

The vox crackled into life, a cross-Legion frequency, and a nerve-jangling screech pierced Agapito's ears. Judging by the shouts and swearing from the others, he was not alone in hearing it. After a moment the wailing dropped to a drawn-out hiss, which then turned into a whispered voice.

'*Flee...*'

Agapito stepped back at another shout from Corbyk. The thing they had taken to be a corpse was rising up, pushing itself to its feet. Around them the other armoured forms were moving also. The red gleam of the monitors brightened, started to fluctuate with an arrhythmic pulsing.

'*Flee...*' insisted the vox-whisper again. '*It devours…*'

The Terminators unconsciously formed a circle. Back to back, weapons raised towards the apparitions lifting out of the gloom. Eight bore the livery of the Ultramarines, but two more of them, Agapito noticed, had the black war-plate and sigils of the Lion's Dark Angels.

More lights flared into illumination as systems came online, their gleam like will o' the wisps in the

roiling smog.

'Something, a kind of tether,' said Corbyk.

Agapito couldn't see at first to what the Raven Guard referred. When one of the Dark Angels swayed, turning slightly with a hand flapping uselessly at an empty pistol holster at its waist, the commander saw something connecting the Space Marine's armour to the command station. It looked like coiled cable on first impression, but there was an altogether more organic slick to the fluid that dribbled from the crack in the legionary's plastron, and the piping quivered with its own life; bulges travelled along its serpentine loops from the legionary to the console. There were bloody handprints on the runepad of the monitoring position.

With a crackle that startled Agapito, the main display burst into brightness, obscured by the bank of mist. The internal speakers boomed into life with a fierce growling while an impression of a monstrous face started to coalesce on the crystal panes of the screen. Agapito was filled with an impression of something unnatural, something immensely powerful coming closer, like the bow wave of a huge ship coming to a quayside. A leviathan surfacing.

'Get us out of here, commander!' snapped Corbyk. 'This place is warp-touched!'

'Not yet,' Agapito replied. He calmed himself with a deep breath and aimed his bolter at one of the Ultramarines. 'First we give these poor servants of the Emperor the peace they've earned.'

He opened fire, and his bolts split open the helm of his target. The others joined in, pouring their fusillade into the juddering legionaries. A howl of pain and rage echoed from the address system. Gal opened up his heavy flamer with a long burst, turning in a broad arc to engulf the consoles with burning promethium. Circuits exploded and screens cracked while Agapito's suit registered the swiftly rising temperature. He looked around the blazing bridge space to assure himself that everything was alight. Nothing mortal would survive the growing conflagration.

Pooling promethium crept towards his foot as Gal fired again, his grunts of satisfaction audible across the vox. Agapito looked down into the crawling fire and thought of the phosphex missiles that the Night Lords had unleashed at the Dropsite Massacre...

The flame was almost at his foot, mesmerising him.

'Commander!'

He was not sure who had shouted but the call broke him out of his distraction. Not yet time for his end, his peace. The war was not over. Not yet.

'*Shadowed Guardian*, emergency recall teleport. Now!'

A second and a lifetime later, the commander's atoms reconfigured on the pads of the teleport bay. As soon as he had regained his equilibrium, a matter of a couple of seconds, Agapito checked the chronometer. Twenty-three minutes until the pursuing ships were at extreme range.

'Command, full bombardment of the target.'

'What about our supplies, commander?'

'Damn the supplies, Jasson. Fire everything we have and keep firing until that ship is vapour!'

TWO

Corax waited in his personal chambers and took the opportunity to review the last crew strength and munitions reports from Branne. It was not pleasant reading. Waiting for the victualling convoy had been a calculated risk, tying the Raven Guard to a single system for several weeks. That it had been delayed – intercepted by the Night Lords, Corax believed in retrospect – should have been a warning. But the parlous state of the Raven Guard's non-legionary strength and supplies had forced Corax into the elongated stay.

That they had not been able to resupply at all verged on disaster. Choosing a near-dead system like Rosario had advantages in stealth, but, since the alien intervention that had befallen the system years earlier, its facilities to deal with a war fleet were severely limited.

A chime turned Corax in his chair, and he activated the door controls. It slid open to reveal Balsar Kurthuri, the blue blazon of the Librarius once more breaking the black of his armour on the right shoulder. He wore no helmet; the cables of his psychic hood framed a face that was drawn, the skin hanging a little loose, eyes deeply sunken and underlined with darkness. His gaze flitted around the chamber for several seconds before it settled on Corax, who bid the Librarian to enter.

'A communication, your message said.' Corax invited Kurthuri to sit in one of the chairs set before his table but the Librarian declined with a gentle shake of the head. 'A warp dream?'

'Something more directed, my lord. The warp has been settling for some time now and our broadcasts have been reaching further and further. Two hours ago I felt a presence, another ship in the warp with us. I consulted with the Navigators and they confirmed that they could see something else sharing the same current. An hour ago I felt a direct contact.'

Corax leaned forward, hands resting on the table top.

'What sort of contact?'

'A message. A request. The other ship belongs to the Iron Hands. They have asked that we drop from warp in the Ukell System a few light years from here.'

'To what end? I have no reason to trust that this is anything but an attempt to lure us into a trap.'

'I have... touched upon the mind of the other Librarian. Or, I suppose you might say, the ripples of our thoughts have crossed. He is genuine, in my opinion. Certainly from the Iron Hands.'

'The Iron Hands have no Librarians, Balsar. My brother, Ferrus Manus, was not overly keen on the use

of warp-born powers. I am surprised you do not recall as such. That skews the matter, does it not?'

'The Gorgon founded no formal Librarius, my lord, but his Legion does have psykers trained in our methods. I attest that he is loyal.'

'Would you wager our lives on such vouchsafe?'

Kurthuri hesitated and then nodded.

'Very well,' continued Corax. 'What did this Iron Hand desire of us?'

'His commander wishes to speak with you, to exchange intelligence.'

'Why can you not do this through your "contact"?'

Kurthuri shrugged. 'It is warp-thought, not a precise system for communicating, my lord. I do not think there is any harm in diverting to Ukell. We are one ship. Easy enough to disengage and break back to warp if there is trouble.'

Corax considered this for a few moments, weighing up the potential for fresh reinforcements against the possibility of attack.

'I will defer to your counsel, Balsar.' He nodded and gestured for the Librarian to leave. 'Inform them we will rendezvous at Ukell, but nothing more. Pass the order to Branne to tell the Navigators to re-plot our course.'

When Kurthuri had left, Corax sat for some time in thought. The restored Librarius had been essential for the vetting of new arrivals to his ad hoc force, and Kurthuri had been at the heart of that. Yet the powers of the warp were so fickle. He had seen first hand what a corrupting influence they could be. Years of war against traitors that had bargained their lives away in return for the power of the immaterium had taught Corax to be cautious in dealing with such matters. Though practical necessity required the Librarians to be active again, the primarch could not shake the feeling that the Emperor's decree to cease their use could not be ignored entirely.

The Emperor had warned against their use for a reason, and perhaps the treachery of Horus and his allies was the proof of that warning.

The Light of *Battle* was a small patrol cruiser, dwarfed by the *Avenger* as the Raven Guard battle-barge moved within a few thousand kilometres to welcome aboard the Iron Hands delegation.

'They can't be carrying more than fifty legionaries,' observed Branne as a pair of Thunderhawks left the patrol ship's flight bays. 'How have they survived alone all this time?'

'You think they have sworn for another master?' said Corax, standing beside the commander in the flight deck chosen to welcome the arrivals. He looked at their escort. A hundred Raven Guard, clean-limbed Raptors from Branne's company, waited along the sides of the aircraft deck, bolters and heavy weapons at the ready, their black Mark VI armour shining in the docking lights. 'Are there other precautions you wish to have taken?'

'I'd prefer you not to be here, my lord,' said Branne. 'What if they have brought charges to detonate? They could fly their gunships directly into us, use them as missiles.'

'You have become inventively suspicious of late, Branne.'

'Not really, my lord. I'm just remembering how we rigged shuttles to drop atomic charges on Kiavahr...'

Corax did not reply. It was an unwelcome reminder of another dark time that had necessitated extreme actions. Would such ruthless measures be needed again before Horus was defeated? Very likely.

'Kurthuri assures me that he and his Librarius-brothers detect no malignant intent,' he said, trying to lighten his own mood as much as reassure Branne.

'And you trust that against all risk, my lord?'

Corax looked sharply at his commander. 'You have firm reason not to? Am I to fear all encounters from

now on, based on nothing greater than the fact that we *have* enemies?'

This time it was Branne who chose to remain silent. He did not meet his primarch's gaze, but stared intently out through the docking screen that shimmered across the open wall of the flight bay.

Soon enough the glimmers of plasma engines resolved into the shape of two metallic-and-black painted Thunderhawks, their blunt noses adorned with the badges of the Iron Hands Legion. They slowed and passed through the navigational shield, turning flankwards to the primarch as they settled on bursts of landing jets.

The ramp descended and a single figure emerged. Branne grunted, nonplussed, and Corax shared his surprise. The large shape of a Dreadnought descended, a bulky war engine almost as tall as the primarch and just as broad.

From the other Thunderhawk two Terminator-armoured figures emerged, both of them sporting multi-barrelled rotary canons and power fists. Upon their armour they bore back banners stitched with the insignia of the X Legion and other devices of their company. They fell in beside the Dreadnought, one to each side. Looking closely, Corax did not recognise the class of armour they wore – some specialist derivative of the Iron Hands.

'I am Iron Father Kardozia,' the Dreadnought intoned, its bass voice echoing across the flight bay. 'Apologies that my form does not allow me to show proper deference with a bow.'

'You... You are excused that formality, Iron Father,' Corax replied after a moment. 'This is Branne, one of my commanders. Branne, you may dismiss the escort.'

The commander hesitated for a second and then nodded. A moment later the Raptors, having received the order across the vox, presented their weapons in salute to the Iron Hands and then turned to file out of the bay doors.

Corax waited, unsure how to proceed. It seemed impolitic to continue the audience in the flight bay as though hosting a guest on the doorstep, but the Iron Father's incarceration made other arrangements difficult. Corax, for the first time since he had grown to his full size, suddenly appreciated the vexations others must have undergone when confronted with the reality of playing host to a primarch.

'Follow me, Iron Father,' he said. Better to make no particular remark on the Iron Hand's internment. 'We can speak in one of the briefing halls.'

'That would be accommodating, Lord Corax.'

The Dreadnought's feet thudded on the deck as Corax turned towards the doors and led the party to the adjoining corridor. Fortunately, he had long been accustomed to navigating his way around the *Avenger* in a manner that suited his size, and so was able to lead Kardozia to the prepared audience chamber without unnecessary diversion. On entering the hall the two Terminators, who had not spoken nor been identified during the journey, took station on either side of the large doors.

Branne set himself at the controls of the large holoslate that dominated the wall of the briefing chamber, while Corax stood to one side. Pneumatics hissing, the Iron Father settled a couple of metres from the primarch.

'My Navigators report that your ship is alone, Lord Corax,' Kardozia began. 'I am surprised to find a primarch in charge of such a small force, even as I am heartened to learn that the rumours of your survival on Isstvan have proven true.'

'It is the nature of the war that we fight on many fronts,' Corax replied, unwilling to concede any more strategic information than was necessary.

'That is a truth we have all been forced to accept,' said the Iron Father. 'My command and I were not at Isstvan, and I cannot say whether I would wish that we had been there or not. So terrible to have been absent from the battle, yet we are alive to continue the fight, unlike so many of our Legion brothers.'

‘The loss of the Gorgon is a hard burden,’ Corax said carefully, not quite sure where the conversation was leading. ‘It is to the credit of the Tenth that their desire for battle endures even now. And, by account, they continue to be a force that Horus would be foolish to ignore.’

‘That is our hope. We are few in number, three squads in all, but we have done what we can to disrupt Horus’ preparations for an attack on Terra. Now that his advance seems imminent I thought it best to move to the defence of the Throneworld.’

‘You believe Horus is making his final move, Iron Father?’ Branne asked.

‘We have patrolled the warp lanes in this and neighbouring sectors since we learned of the treachery at Isstvan, commander. Pirates, you might call us, picking on such merchants that aid the enemy, ambushing warships within our potential to destroy. Over the last months the size of the flotillas passing through have grown and grown.’ The Dreadnought swivelled its sarcophagus to face the primarch. ‘A new offensive has begun already, Lord Corax.’

‘So you intend to fight at Terra. I must inform you that it is, for the moment at least, not my plan to return to the Solar System.’ Corax knitted his fingers together and held them to his chest. ‘You are welcome to join our force, subject to my command, and continue the war from behind the advance of the enemy. Or, if you desire, you may continue on your way without delay.’

‘Though I had resolved to make the journey to Terra, the battle of which I speak is not for the Throneworld, not yet. Though confronted by overwhelming force of late, we have not been without targets of opportunity. These smaller supply ships and renegade traders have furnished me with fresh knowledge. The attention of the Warmaster seems to be turning towards the region of Beta-Garmon. Legions loyal to the Emperor and those that turned have been committing ever greater forces to the battle for an important conduit system.’

‘Beta-Garmon?’ Branne shook his head and started working on the hololith controls.

‘I know it,’ said Corax. ‘One of the core jump worlds, a perfect system from which to launch the final attack on Earth.’

‘Then you agree that it is imperative Horus cannot be allowed to take Beta-Garmon,’ said Kardozia. ‘I would be honoured to fight beside the warriors of the Nineteenth Legion.’

‘Your assessment is flawed, Iron Father,’ Corax said slowly. ‘Or, at the least, presumptuous. I concur that Beta-Garmon is perhaps the most significant warzone prior to the invasion of the Solar System itself. I do not believe that the best way to contest it is to join the battle already underway.’

‘I am perhaps bound by a different logic of war, Lord Corax, but I cannot make sense of such a declaration. How does one win a battle unless one takes part?’

‘I have a few doctrines, on war and leadership, that guide my decisions. They are called my Axioms. Paramount is the Axiom of Victory. To be where the enemy does not desire you to be. If Horus pulls his forces towards Beta-Garmon you can be sure that he is confident of victory – whether swift or hard-fought. I have never known him to swing a blow without him knowing exactly how it would land. If he chooses Beta-Garmon, we must fight elsewhere.’

The Iron Father remained silent.

‘I understand that this may seem difficult, but do you concede the truth of what I say?’ Corax forced a smile. ‘You may disagree. I am always open to new counsel.’

‘To concede the battle to Horus simply because he desires it would be counter-productive, Lord Corax. A fulfilment of what the renegade Warmaster desires. His objective is to seize Beta-Garmon and thus stage an attack directly on Terra.’

Corax shook his head, his smile disappearing. ‘No, that is limited thinking, Iron Father. I mean no criticism of your method, but your conclusion is wrong. Horus desires to conquer Terra and it is this goal

we must thwart. Nothing before that conflict is of consequence save as it affects that final battle. What worth the warrior who dies at Beta-Garmon if the traitors enter the Solar System?'

'Better that we stay the Warmaster's hand before it reaches Terra, or weaken his forces such that the last battle is beyond him.'

Corax stroked his lip with a long, slender finger, thinking how best to phrase his thoughts. While he was unconcerned with convincing Kardozia about the correctness of his strategy, the chance to voice his thoughts aloud, to pit them against a mind not shaped by his own Axioms, was a worthwhile endeavour in itself.

'Consider not only the actions of our enemies, but also our allies. Horus desires battle at Beta-Garmon. By your account he has despatched considerable force there. Who contests the system against him?'

'I cannot say for sure, Lord Corax. I am fortunate to have Brother Dalves, a warp-wielder, in my entourage. One of only a handful possessed by our Legion. Assisted by my astropath he has detected or received, like your signal, many broadcasts from ships heading to the battle zone. I have also drawn my conclusion from the effort the traitors are evidently expending to take the system – if it were only lightly contested such measures would not be needed. Many armies have responded, I believe, as well as forge worlds and scattered warriors of my own Legion.'

'And have you news of the Praetorian? Has Dorn moved from Terra to fight at Beta-Garmon? Do the Custodian Guard ride out to take the battle to Horus? Maybe the Emperor himself has set forth as well?'

'I have not heard–'

'If such a thing occurred, we would hear the clarions across the galaxy, storms or no. If the Emperor, Malcador and Dorn do not move towards Beta-Garmon, be sure they think the battle there is already lost. Horus does not fight battles he cannot win, nor do my other brothers nor my father. Why should I throw myself onto this pyre that the Warmaster has built?'

The Iron Father was silent for some time, remaining motionless as he analysed the primarch's words. Corax knew that the warriors of the X Legion valued cold logic, the knowledge of metal rather than the emotion of flesh. Had he presented a logic that would sway the Iron Hand?

After a while, the Dreadnought stirred into life once more, rising up on straightened legs.

'It seems that we have discord, Lord Corax. I cannot ignore the calls of my gene-brothers any more than if they came from the lips of the Gorgon himself.' The Iron Father lifted a clawed fist in salute. 'I know that others think we aspire to be machines, but we are misrepresented. The desire to eliminate mortal folly, and fleshly weakness, is not to dehumanise ourselves, but to be better *men*. Inside this metal case remains what is left of my body, the carcass that continues to hold my spirit. Being somewhat closer to machinehood than most of my brothers in the Tenth gives me a specific viewpoint. That spirit is the essence of what I am, what it means to be a defender of humanity. I do not fault your reasoning, but I wish it were otherwise. It seems to me that risks must be taken. We cannot concede every battle to the Warmaster without contest, even if we cannot hope to win. The struggle, the degradation of his armies, is a worthy objective in itself.'

Corax raised his fist to return the salute, neither disappointed nor surprised by the passage of the conversation.

'If I had spare supplies then I would offer them,' said the primarch. 'But I wish you all speed to Beta-Garmon, where I am sure you will fight with distinction and honour the memory of my brother, Ferrus Manus.'

'We fight not to honour his memory,' the Dreadnought said, his vocalisers hissing in a metallic approximation of a sigh. 'All that is left is vengeance.'

'Branne, please escort the Iron Father back to his gunship. When he has departed, direct the bridge to

make way for the jump-point as quickly as possible and then return to me.'

'As you command, my lord.' Branne set off towards the door, the Dreadnought stomping after him. The Terminator guards fell in behind their master and then Corax was alone with his thoughts.

The primarch activated the holo-slate. He had a perfect memory of the star cluster where Beta-Garmon was situated and had already calculated the different jump times and distances depending on whether he departed directly, or went via Rosario and through assorted other routes. Seeing the stars spread out in the three-dimensional display helped him clarify his thinking, just as speaking to Kardozia or one of his subordinates brought additional perspective.

It was thus, finger on lip, staring at the display, that Branne found him ten minutes later. The commander looked at the hololith system markers and frowned.

'I thought we were not going to Beta-Garmon, my lord.'

'We're not.' Corax turned his gaze to the commander. 'We are in no position to reveal our true strength, or lack of it, nor confront a massed enemy in open battle, no matter how many allies wait for us. But if the war is there, perhaps it would be wise to be *near* Beta-Garmon all the same.'

'To be other than where the enemy desires us?' said Branne.

Corax nodded.

Though only a few light years from Corax's original course, the diversion to Ukell and attendant deceleration and acceleration had put the *Avenger* several days behind its projected timeline. It was no surprise to find that the majority of the Raven Guard fleet had preceded the primarch's ship and were waiting in the Rosario System when the *Avenger* arrived. Corax's first action was to bring his commanders to the battle-barge for a war council, to discuss the news brought to him by Kardozia. While the ranking officers were brought aboard the *Avenger,* the other ships were despatched to Rosario itself to see to whom the planet currently owed its loyalties, what supplies could be scavenged and if there were any vessels or troops that could be commandeered.

The council met in the same chamber where Corax had hosted the Iron Father, each commander attended by a handful of their staff. The primarch knew them all by sight – as his force had become smaller and smaller it more closely resembled the uprising on Lycaeus. They operated more like cells than companies, individual operation and initiative over rigid structure and central command.

Branne was flanked by two of his Raptors – one each of the 'smooths' and the 'roughs' as they had unofficially called themselves. Representing the pure-gene detachment of the company was Xanda Neroka, the lieutenant markings on his Mark VI armour fresh and bright. Beside him hunched Navar Hef, a physical monstrosity of tufted hair, fangs and yellow eyes. There were fewer and fewer of the roughs: most had died in battle, while others had succumbed to their mutations. Of the survivors some, like Hef, continued to transform. A few had been confined to the lower holds, no longer masters of their own minds, though whether their madness was driven by knowledge of their fate or simple physical devolution was impossible to know.

Hef looked at Corax as he noticed his primarch's stare upon him. So distorted was his face that it was impossible to read any human expression there, but the gaze that met the primarch's still contained the spark of intelligence.

Agapito had the same square chin, brooding brow and flat cheeks as his brother, Branne, though an old scar marked him above the eye. Soukhounou was marked by tribal tattoos, pale lines and dots against his dark skin. Forced to survive on Isstvan for many months, Gherith Arendi was hollow-cheeked and sunken-eyed, his emaciation a permanent consequence, it seemed. Like Agapito he bore the mark of injuries from the Dropsite Massacre – three lacerations from left ear to shoulder. Corax knew well what manner of

weapon could cause such a wound; Arendi had nearly lost his throat to the claws of a warp-tainted traitor.

It took an effort for the primarch not to move his gaze from Arendi's scar to the claws of Hef. It was unkind to make such association, but also impossible not to.

The companies of his commanders had changed much since the Hawks, Falcons, Talons and Raptors had been formed. Initially they had been dedicated detachments of tactical, support and assault troops. With the Legion divided and rejoined and divided again many times over the passing years, independence and flexibility had proven more efficient. Each company was multi-purpose now, capable of self-supporting attack, and even breaking down into far smaller operational units.

The commanders were accompanied by allies not of the Raven Guard. Arcatus Vindix Centurio was first among the Legio Custodes that had escorted the primarch from Terra. Only half a dozen of his warriors remained. Nicknamed 'the Emperor's Eagle' by the legionaries, he possessed a thin face with a sharply pointed nose, his blond hair swept back by a gold band.

Last was Captain Noriz, the Imperial Fist, who had become de facto representative of the waifs and strays of many Legions that had come together to heed Corax's call to arms.

One was missing.

'No news of Aloni?' asked the primarch.

Branne shook his head and his expression soured.

'Unconfirmed, but Lieutenant Vabus on the *Revenant* says the *Spirit of Deliverance* never made it to the jump boundary.'

'Then we must proceed as if Aloni and his crew are lost. Arendi, you have no command. The Falcons are yours.'

'With respect, my lord, I would prefer to remain directly on your staff,' said the head of the now defunct Shadow Wardens, Corax's personal retinue. 'I think I best serve the Legion there.'

Corax raised an eyebrow but his former bodyguard did not flinch. Corax shrugged. There was little to be gained by awarding command to a warrior that did not desire it.

'Very well, I shall consider alternatives.' Corax sat down at the head of the long briefing table and clasped his hands together, resting them on the dark, varnished wood. Seeing them all together reminded him that he was fast approaching a moment of decision.

'We face a turning point in the war,' he told them. 'The conflict narrows, focusing on the Solar System. It will not be long before Horus launches his decisive attack. We have known that it would come to this, despite all efforts. My strategy has been to bleed the traitors dry, to prise oppressed systems from their grasp behind their backs, to waylay and forestall their supplies to buy time for Dorn to fortify Earth. We have killed more than we have lost since Isstvan, but we cannot hope to amend for the blow we suffered at the hands of the treacherous.

'So I face a choice. Do we continue on this course? Do I bring the Legion together as one force? If so, to which system shall I direct it? A great cauldron of battle erupts at Beta-Garmon. That is not our kind of war, not in our diminished state. But that is not to say we cannot assist in the effort of the Emperor's servants there.'

The primarch noticed that Agapito was agitated, eager to speak. He gestured for the commander to share whatever news burned at him.

'I think I know where the Night Lords have come from, my lord,' Agapito said. 'On a ship we boarded we discovered captives. Ultramarines among them.'

'So?' said Arendi. 'Did you free these captives? Where are they now? What have they told you?'

'We could not save them.' Agapito's brow furrowed deeply and his jaw tightened. 'But they did not need to speak to tell their story. The storms are dissipating – we have all witnessed it. The warp doesn't boil

with the same fury of even a month ago. Not for years have any on this side of the galaxy been able to penetrate the tempest, but now... Forces are coming west, daring the storm. These Ultramarines, and the Night Lords that brought them, must have come from the Five Hundred Worlds.'

'There is another explanation,' said Soukhounou. 'Guilleman's warriors have been despatched to other postings. They could have been on our side of the storm before the outbreak of the war.'

'But why so many Night Lords, arriving from where?' asked Corax. 'I think Agapito is right. This force that beset us has newly arrived from somewhere else. The war against the Ultramarines would seem a likely source.'

'But does that mean well or bad?' said Branne. 'If the Night Lords have come, does that mean they have won? We saw the Word Bearers and World Eaters go into the east and return. Maybe the Five Hundred Worlds are no more. The enemy have lifted the storm because it's no longer needed to contain the Ultramarines and Blood Angels.'

'And Dark Angels,' added Noriz. 'When I was at Deliverance there came rumours that the Lion led a great part of his Legion into the warp tempest. It is possible that our loyal brothers have triumphed and in doing so have broken the power of the storm.'

'If that is the case they will make all speed for Terra,' said Agapito. 'We would be wise to join them.'

'Our intelligence is incomplete,' said Corax. 'There are forces on both sides not accounted for. I learned that Horus attacks Beta-Garmon with great strength, but we are low on details. Is the Warmaster himself there, does his Legion battle in the system? Where are the Alpha Legion? The White Scars? The Wolves? My brothers, ally and traitor, each worth an army – where do they fight?'

'I sense that you have a plan regardless, my lord,' said Arcatus. 'You do not summon councils to talk in circles.'

'I do have a plan,' said Corax, 'or more exactly an approach. The time for small action is fast passing. Such as it is, we must fight with all the strength we have. The Raven Guard must come together, and such allies as we have remaining.'

'You mean the Therions?' said Branne. He sounded pensive at the thought.

'Yes, the Therion Cohort. From the last communiqué of the vice-Caesari, they are not so far from here. Depending on how engaged they are, we would not have to wait long for them to join the muster, or perhaps rendezvous with them closer to our ultimate target.'

Branne simply nodded, whatever misgivings he had remaining unvoiced. Corax felt no urge to tease them out of the Raptors commander.

The primarch looked at Noriz and then at Arcatus.

'I had hoped one or both of you would make representation to return to the Throneworld. I have no inclination to stand behind the walls built by Lord Dorn, but I am open to argument.'

Noriz looked at the others and then at Corax.

'I do not doubt that I will see Terra again soon enough, my lord primarch, but I am content under your command until the time to return is obvious.'

'Arcatus?'

'It is not a time for hesitation, Lord Corax. Once committed, we must remain. I think there is yet time, as Captain Noriz says, to seek further injury of the traitors before we join the final defence. Simple mathematics of war suggest that time spent idle waiting for the enemy to attack diminishes our impact on the course of events. We are few in number and must maximise such multipliers as we can.'

'True, but if the walls of Dorn are to be a multiplier, then every warrior we save to man them would count a hundred,' argued Noriz. He smiled wryly. 'But then I *would* say that. Even so, arriving in time rather than early would be fine by me.'

‘We need to know more of what occurs around Beta-Garmon,’ said Corax, ‘and the surest way to find out is to go ourselves. The closer we are to the action, the more certain the reports of it.’

‘Your commands, my lord?’ asked Agapito, standing as if eager to depart.

‘We have a while yet, and must make communication with the Therion Cohort before we depart. There are still several of our capital ships that have not yet arrived at the rendezvous, and such sustenance and supplies as we can glean from Rosario will be essential. As I see it, the war at Beta-Garmon will not be decided in days but perhaps months, even years. We can spend two more weeks here. I will assess the ongoing situation and order new movements and dispositions accordingly.’

Corax stood and dismissed them. Arendi lingered for a moment and received permission to remain with a single nod.

‘I did not mean to rebuff the honour of leading a company, Corax,’ he said. ‘I do not think company command best suits my attitude these days.’

‘And what attitude is that?’

‘To kill the traitors whenever and wherever possible.’

‘There is nothing wrong with such desire,’ said Corax. He moved around the table to stand in front of the legionary. ‘We should seek the death of our foes.’

‘But not to the exclusion of other considerations, am I correct?’ Arendi glanced over his shoulder, as if looking at the departed officers. ‘You need to be able to trust your leaders, now more than ever.’

‘What are you suggesting, Gherith?’ Corax demanded. ‘Who can I not trust?’

‘They are not traitors, that is not what I mean!’ Arendi said hurriedly. He cleared his throat. ‘Take Agapito. He’s as hungry for vengeance as I am. You don’t need two commanders spoiling for a fight, perhaps turning a blind eye or deaf ear to orders that might take them out of battle. And Noriz, and Arcatus, they will want to go to Terra at some point, no matter what they claim today. You cannot order them to remain, so what if they choose an inopportune moment to exercise their right to return to the Throneworld? If you are bringing all of us together again, every element of that fleet, every warrior in that force needs to be committed to the same ends as you are.’

Corax was silent, uncomfortable with Arendi’s assertions but not able to dismiss them out of hand.

‘And my place is here, next to you, my lord,’ Arendi concluded. ‘Bodyguard or not.’

He said nothing more and left. Not for the first time Corax’s thoughts were a whirl, an ever-changing universe of factors to ponder. He leaned on the table; the wood creaked under his weight.

It would be so easy to return to his father, to seek comfort and assurance from the Emperor. So simple to stand at the wall and follow the lead of Dorn.

And so weak, to deny the real task that had been set before him.

Four days before the fleet was set to jump from the system, as the twenty-two starships that had been assembled under Corax’s command accelerated towards the outer system, the astropaths and Librarians reported a movement of ships in the warp. Other vessels were in-bound. Arendi was with his primarch in the strategium of the *Avenger* when Balsar Kurthuri delivered the confirmation.

‘A small fleet, my lord, is our best estimate.’ The Librarian glanced away from Corax, aware that his vagueness was unacceptable, even though it was unavoidable. ‘Half a dozen at least, no more than a dozen.’

‘Warships?’ said Arendi when Corax remained silent. ‘Allegiance?’

‘Impossible to say. We have not broadcast any inquiries. The ships may not be heading to Rosario after all – better to not attract attention.’

‘We outnumber them,’ Arendi said, turning to his lord. ‘And we are in coherent formation. If the Night

Lords have somehow followed us they will arrive piecemeal from the warp. Easy pickings.'

'Do not be so sure,' said Branne, approaching from the other side of the command deck. He stood next to Corax, who seemed lost in thought. 'The traitors have a way with the warp tides – we have seen it often. They will come together, I expect, as one fleet.'

'And they will be destroyed as one fleet,' said Arendi. 'We still outnumber them.'

'Only just,' the primarch said at last, moving his eyes to Arendi and then Branne, his gaze quickly passing over the Librarian. 'If we assume they are all capital ships, even a handful at full strength is two-thirds of our frontline vessels. And if they are a dozen... Regardless, it is a confrontation we cannot afford. We must minimise our losses until we can commit to a worthwhile battle.'

'We run? Again?' Branne did not wholly succeed in keeping the disappointment from his voice. Corax threw a hard look at the commander of the Raptors.

'Have all my commanders become so desirous of battle that they would throw away victory to sate their bloodlust?'

Branne stepped back as though struck, stunned by the outburst. An awkward silence followed, into which Arendi ventured a further thought.

'We might not fully choose the time and place of that confrontation, Corax. The First Axiom of Victory is an ideal, but in practical terms we might just have to fight whatever enemies are presented to us, when we get the chance.'

'We take whatever fights we can get?' Corax's lip curled. 'That is the nadir of our ambition. I vowed that Horus would rue the day he did not finish the Raven Guard at Isstvan. Time runs short to be true to my word, and I will not waste what might be the last telling blow of my Legion.'

'Of course,' said Arendi, suppressing any further dissent.

'I...' Kurthuri stopped even before he started. A twitch of the eye indicated that he was listening to his vox bead. The Librarian's eyes widened with surprise. He sub-vocalised a reply and nodded as he received a response.

'The omens favour us, my lord,' he said. 'Connra Deakon, our most senior astrotelepath, has received a direct communication from the incoming ships.' The Librarian smiled and looked at the commanders. 'They come from Deliverance, my friends. The ciphers and countersigns are all correct. Reinforcements from our home world.'

Corax immediately ordered his Chief Librarian to seek further confirmation of the incoming ships' loyalty and identities and Kurthuri hurried away to comply. For a while neither the primarch nor his officers said anything, contemplating in silence the import of this news.

'We did put out an encrypted call for *all* Raven Guard to assemble here,' Branne said eventually, with a hint of a smile. 'With the storms weakening, the astropaths' signal must have reached as far as the Ravenspire!'

'Or they had already left and were seeking us,' said Arendi. 'Even in the best conditions their progress would have to be miraculously swift to arrive so soon.'

'True,' conceded Branne. He flexed his fingers as if in anticipation. 'How many, do you think? It's been years since any forces arrived from Deliverance. How many legionaries have passed through in that time?'

'Temper your excitement, commander,' Corax said quietly. 'Young, untested troops are of questionable value at this time. Given even the most generous timescale for their induction, enhancement and training, none of them can be more than six months into their black carapaces. And with little experience as Scouts to act as foundation.'

'We were all such raw material once,' said Arendi. He looked at his primarch, the immense warrior

quizzical in his expression, and could not fight back a short laugh. ‘At least, those of us not personally created by the Emperor. Haven’t we been looking for some good news lately? Let’s be thankful for the small boons we get.’

Corax did not look convinced.

‘We shall see,’ he said. He started towards the portal of the strategium. ‘If all proves well, have the arriving fleet await us at jump distance and call for their commander to report to the *Avenger* as soon as possible.’

He did not wait for Branne’s affirmative, but strode from the main bridge, jaw set hard. The Raptors’ leader directed a look at Arendi.

‘He has lost too much to count many blessings,’ explained Branne. ‘He dare not allow himself hope.’

‘How can he fight on without hope? It doesn’t make any sense.’

‘Don’t confuse hope with belief, Gherith. Corax believes we will win. He has never doubted that – only the cost that will be paid.’

‘Primarchs, eh?’ Arendi let out an explosive breath. ‘I’ve just realised who he reminds me of. Himself. Before the Emperor came.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The primarch, he was like this before the uprising. Taking nothing for granted. Looking for the worst in any situation. *Expecting* bad news every day. As though anticipation of it could avoid calamity.’ Arendi stepped close to Branne and dropped his voice. ‘Everything is coming to a head, Branne. If I didn’t think it impossible, I would say our primarch was nervous.’

And with that disquieting thought shared, Arendi left the strategium to seek out the other former Shadow Wardens. He had an idea, which was as likely to get him into trouble as anything else.

Corax reviewed the ranks of black armoured warriors standing perfectly to attention in the main muster hall of the *Ravenstrike*. Four hundred and twenty-six Raven Guard, armoured in Mark VI war-plate manufactured on Kiavahr, armed with the latest bolter designs and heavy weapons. A similar number awaited inspection on two more battle-barges, freshly refitted at the docks of Natolli Prime. In all, one thousand, one hundred and forty-eight legionaries. With them they had brought four Natollian regiments, some six thousand Imperial Army veterans and the transports to carry them.

Corax remained stern as he strode along the front rank. The armour of the newcomers was painted in the flat black of the Raven Guard and they bore the Legion device and squad markings, but no company or battalion sigils. Arendi followed, just a step behind.

‘You seem eager, Gherith,’ the primarch remarked. ‘You dog my steps like a shadow.’

‘I was thinking, which is perhaps a poor use of my time, I know,’ said Arendi. ‘On what you said, about offering me command of the Falcons. I have reconsidered the offer.’

‘Yes?’ Corax stopped and turned on his heel. ‘You think I would extend the invitation again after being refused?’

Arendi showed no shame, and met his master’s gaze.

‘I don’t want the Falcons. I want these legionaries. My lord.’

Corax’s eyes narrowed.

‘Why?’

‘Fresh meat,’ Arendi replied quietly. ‘I mean, a fresh start. Clean cloth. Whatever you want to call it, a chance to set the future straight.’

‘And you’re the man to do that?’ Corax was unconvinced. ‘I made Branne my Master of Recruits for a reason.’

‘And gave him the Raptors,’ replied Arendi. He continued quickly as Corax’s displeasure increased.

‘Not that Branne had anything to do with... I mean, he is a fearsome warrior and leader...’

Corax’s silent glare forced Arendi to continue. ‘I miss my Shadow Wardens,’ he confessed. ‘It wasn’t about being your bodyguards. Even after the Legion came it was obvious that you were a greater fighter than any company of Space Marines. But we would always be close. Dependable. You trusted us to do whatever you commanded. Your hand, our blades.’

‘You said I could not trust you, only weeks ago. You made a good point. Of all my ranked officers, you are the least stable. Why should I believe you now?’

‘Because I was wrong?’ Arendi’s stare had not moved from the primarch. Corax’s attention flicked to the pale stripes of his facial scars and back to his eyes. The legionary read the primarch’s meaning. He pointed to the claw marks. ‘I said I was after revenge. Perhaps I still am. But there are different ways of getting back at the traitors. It was Agapito who told me you once said “Victory is Vengeance”. Well, maybe leading a thousand new Shadow Wardens against the traitors is vengeance too.’

They reached the end of the line and Corax gestured to the officer at the end to step forward.

‘Name?’ asked the primarch.

‘Shray Chayvon, my lord,’ replied the officer. ‘Provisional lieutenant, my lord.’

‘There are forty-one of my original Shadow Wardens left, scattered through the other companies,’ Arendi continued. ‘A perfect officer corps.’

‘You do not have time to train them in the manner of the Shadow Wardens,’ Corax countered, then turned back to Chayvon. ‘Well turned out, lieutenant. What do you want to do now?’

‘My lord?’ The officer’s expression was hidden by the baleen-snouted mask of his Mark VI armour, but his confusion was obvious.

‘You are a Space Marine of the Emperor, a legionary of the Raven Guard. You aspired to this since you were old enough to know who we were, yes?’

‘Yes, my lord! I have always hoped to serve you in the Legion.’

‘And now that you are a Raven Guard, what do you want to *do*, Lieutenant?’

The officer reflexively glanced towards Arendi for guidance.

‘Just say what’s on your mind,’ Arendi told him. ‘The truth.’

‘I want to kill traitors, my lord,’ said the officer. ‘That’s what I’ve been trained to do.’

Arendi laughed. Corax was not so humoured. The words reminded him of Halvar Diaro, one of the initial Raptors, those who had come to be known amongst their company brothers as the First Nine. All were dead now. One of the curses of his primarch heritage, Corax’s memory meant he could recall the death reports of every warrior that had ever served under him. Diaro had been split in half by a traitor lascannon at Mourner’s Drift. The primarch motioned for Chayvon to return to the line.

‘You are right of course, my lord – I don’t have time to train them as your Shadow Wardens,’ Arendi said. ‘But then again, we’re not fighting prison guards or orks. We’re going to kill traitor legionaries. I reviewed the armoury manifests. There’s a big consignment of heavy and support weapons from Kiavahr with the reinforcements. New blood might be better used that way than right at the sharp end of an attack or a bodyguard. We’re going to get into a straight-up fight soon enough, Corax. Some big guns never hurt.’

The specifics themselves did not interest Corax as much as the fact that Arendi had spent some time working them out. He was impassioned, invigorated by the idea of commanding these new troops. Senior officers, those whose service dated back to the rebellion before the arrival of the Emperor, were few on the ground these days. Would any of the others really want to take command of what was, to all intents, an untested force? They might well be a yoke across the back of their commander.

‘You can have them,’ the primarch told Arendi. The legionary accepted this with a grave nod, but the hint of a smile danced at the corner of his lips.

‘We’ll have to get them some company colours,’ said Arendi. ‘What would you like, Corax?’

‘Leave them as they are,’ the primarch replied. ‘I like them as they are.’

‘All right then, we’ll be your Black Guard, my lord.’

‘I like that too,’ Corax said with a thoughtful nod. ‘You might no longer be my shadow, but you stay as close as one for now, and you do exactly as I command. My hand, your blades.’

‘Yes, my lord. As it always was.’

As he was leaving the hall, Corax’s keen hearing caught a conversation between Arendi and the new lieutenant, who was asking if he had given the right answer to the primarch.

‘The only answer worth giving,’ he heard the new commander of the Black Guard reply.

Hef followed Branne, trying hard not to knuckle along with his hands although his extended arms made it easier than staying upright. The commander had offered no explanation as to why Hef and the other Raptors had been called aboard the *Avenger*. The fleet had been informed that reinforcements had arrived from Deliverance; perhaps they were going to be added to the Raptors?

They passed one of the training halls and Hef saw several squads at bolter drill, moving back and forth in harmony with each other. It reminded the lieutenant of his training – cut short by the encroachment of the genetic mutation introduced into his system.

‘What was that, Navar?’ They stopped by the open door. Branne turned his head, his expression one of inquiry.

Hef realised he had let out a growl.

‘The new ones?’ Hef said to cover himself. It hadn’t been what he meant to say but the words formed differently to what he was thinking, as though there was interference between brain and mouth. He formed his next sentence with more care. ‘What is to become of the newcomers? Are the Raptors to be reinforced, sir?’

Branne shook his head.

‘No, they are now the Black Guard, apparently. Arendi has taken charge. That’s why you’ve all been recalled to the *Avenger* to fight for me directly. The Black Guard will be taking command of the support ships and escorts.’

‘No more Raptors,’ wheezed Hef.

‘Something of a dying breed,’ said Branne, not without sympathy. He thumped a comradely fist against Hef’s heavily modified plastron. ‘These Black Guard don’t have the heart of true Raptors, anyway. Irreplaceable, you are. Unique.’

Hef accepted this with a silent nod, but the words did not sit comfortably for him. Branne was a good commander. Diligent, disciplined and brave. But though he led the Raptors, he was not one of them. He did not know what was in their hearts, any more than Hef could know what it had been like to fight alongside the primarch to free Deliverance. More than a generation divided them; an entirely different galaxy separated their experiences even before one considered the physical changes.

‘Doomed,’ whispered Hef, before he could stop the words leaving his lips.

Branne looked at him sharply.

‘No! When Terra is free from the threat of Horus, Corax will speak with the Emperor himself. It was the Emperor’s knowledge that Corax used to bring life to the Raptors, and it is the Emperor’s knowledge that will cure you.’

The thought brightened Hef’s mood, even though losing command of the *Fearless* was a disappointment. Given the occasional lapses that had troubled Hef of late – not that he had mentioned them to anyone – perhaps it was for the best.

‘Time to tell the others of their new duties,’ said Branne. He moved off along the corridor.

Hef lingered for a few seconds more, watching the Black Guard go through their drills. Four years. Four years separated him from them, the gulf as wide as the century that separated Hef from Branne. Too swiftly the hope of the future became the mistakes of the past.

Then another thought occurred. Perhaps if they travelled to Terra he would actually come to meet the Emperor. Cheered by this possibility, Hef hurried after his commander.

Branne could see the *Glory of Therion* through the viewports of the shuttle. The Imperial Army transport, commissioned at the outbreak of the civil war, was larger than the *Avenger*. Its slab sides contained over three hundred holds, launch bays, barracks, medicae facilities and strategic command halls. Beyond stretched the rest of the Therion Cohort, dozens of ships carrying thousands of troops and war machines. Despite its bulk the *Glory of Therion* was purely a transport and bore less firepower than a strike cruiser – hence the line of battleships and grand cruisers that glittered a few thousand kilometres away.

‘It’s big,’ said Branne.

‘Yes,’ said Corax, lost in thought. ‘Big.’

The leader of the Raven Guard had been distracted since they had dropped into the Pallas System for the rendezvous. He could only guess at what occupied his primarch. The commander tried another tack to engage Corax.

‘Is this ceremony really necessary, my lord? Couldn’t we have just translated, signalled to the vice-Caesari and carried on?’

‘The ceremony is important, Branne. Therion and Deliverance have long-standing bonds that should be renewed on occasion.’

Branne decided that the straightforward approach would serve best.

‘What concerns you, my lord? You have spoken barely ten words since we met this morning.’

‘I have much to think about,’ said the primarch. ‘Perhaps I need to concentrate rather than engage in chatter with my warriors.’

Chastened, Branne held his silence for the rest of the journey.

A guard of honour fifty strong waited for the primarch and Branne. Arendi and a squad of his new Black Guard joined them from the main compartment as they set foot on the Therion vessel.

‘If you would follow me, Lord Corax,’ said an officer with a half-cape and sash, the clasp that connected them indicating the rank of a tribune.

Branne stepped forward and examined the officer closely.

‘Pelon? Marcus made you tribune?’

‘The vice-Caesari did, Commander Branne,’ said the officer. He lowered his voice. ‘I still prepare his meals and wash his laundry, all the same. No command status...’

A gentle cough from Corax reminded them of his presence and the Therion tribune bowed and waved a hand for Corax to follow before heading towards the flight bay doors.

‘A novelty to be the one granted audience for a change,’ remarked the primarch as they stepped into the corridor and turned after Pelon.

Just as Corax had not long before guided the Iron Father to council, now the tribune led the primarch to one of the mustering halls of the *Glory of Therion*. A thousand warriors and more awaited the contingent from the Raven Guard, a full quarter of them officers from the attendant regiments and vessels. They stood to attention and lifted their weapons in salute as Corax stepped into the immense chamber. To one side, standing atop a small stage, Marcus Valerius waited.

He was in his thirties, as far as such things could be guessed, handsome and aristocratic from the lineage

of Old Earth. Clean-shaven, the vice-Caesari was heavily tanned, his eyes bright against the dark of his flesh, the gold of his cuff stark against exposed hands that were crossed with thin lines of pale scar tissue. He held a rod of office at his hip, and a laspistol and sabre hung on his belt.

Pelon peeled away to the ranked soldiers and the vice-Caesari dropped to one knee, head dipped, when Corax ascended the flight of steps with two strides. Standing again, Valerius lifted a fist to his chest plate. A deafening crash resounded across the hall as the Therions followed suit and raised their voices in a single wordless shout of praise.

'Hail Corax,' boomed Valerius. 'Hail the saviour of Deliverance, Commander of the Raven Guard, honoured bylord of Therion!'

Corax took the salute of the Therions in silence, his expression grave. Valerius looked tiny compared to the primarch, overwhelmed by the physical presence of Corax even more than a legionary. It was like an infant looking up at an adult.

'How many?' the primarch asked.

'Twenty-three thousand fighting men and women, my lord,' Valerius replied. 'Three armoured battalions, one artillery regiment, three air wings – one bomber and two mixed-purpose. Carried on fourteen transporters escorted by three deep void squadrons with full crew and orbital assets.'

'That's a lot of soldiers,' said Branne. 'Where have you been hiding them?'

Valerius smiled.

'Good to see you, Commander Branne. The Therion Cohort has been receiving constant reinforcements for the past two years. Our motherworld is generous, and the loyal Mechanicum happen to supply the arms and vehicles we need in return for protection against their traitor priests.'

'You are fortunate,' said Corax.

'Blessed, you might say,' said the vice-Caesari. 'We stand ready to serve the Emperor and defend the Throneworld with even greater vigour than Therion itself.'

'We're not going to Terra,' said Branne with a shake of the head.

'We're not?' Marcus Valerius regained his composure quickly. 'Where...?'

'Our next battlezone is under review,' Corax told Marcus. He turned away and started back towards the doors. The Black Guard hurried after, taken by surprise by their leader's sudden departure. The long ranks of Therions held aloft their arms again at the bark of their officers. Arendi darted a quick look at Branne and followed.

'With twenty-three thousand Imperial soldiers in tow,' Branne said, 'I'll bet you the *Avenger* against this shiny new ship he's not planning a sneak attack.'

If not for the support of his power armour, Balsar Kurthuri would have been stooped as he made his way back to the Librarius chamber of the *Avenger*. Reaching the threshold of the sanctum hall he set his shoulders and took a deep breath. The other Librarians needed to see him full of vigour despite the arduous labours they had undertaken.

He touched a gauntleted finger to the lock of the door and sent a psychic signal. A minute buzz of power flickered along the crystal runelock and a moment later came the heavy thud of a bolt dropping. Kurthuri pushed at the door and it swung easily on its hinges, allowing him to step into the sanctum.

Hard-edged runic shapes lined the walls. They gently glowed with power that pulsed in time with the background rhythm of the Geller field that enveloped the warp-drifting battle-barge. To Kurthuri it was like stepping from a room filled with a babbling crowd into solitude and silence.

Two others of his select brotherhood waited for him. They sat on the benches at the centre of the hall, facing each other, heads bowed. Fara Tek was an old veteran of the uprising, his face lined with age

despite his Space Marine physiology. They had long familiarity, beginning with the shared experience of the experiments by the Kiavahrans on those that had shown unusual talents. Both had spent time on the Red Level of the prison before Corax had rescued them with his rebellion.

The other was also a native of Deliverance, Syth Arriax, discovered by the Librarius not long before the treachery of Horus. Though less than thirty Terran years old, Syth looked twice that age, his grey eyes heavy with forced experience and hard-won wisdom.

Neither looked up as Kurthuri approached but he felt the touch of their awareness on his mind.

'I was not expecting you, Fara,' he said aloud. It was better to speak openly in this place – the warded walls kept psychic energy in as well as without and the hall acted like an echo chamber on telepathic communication. 'When did you arrive from the *Kosmoz*?'

'An hour ago, Balsar, my dear comrade.' Fara did not move but a stroke of welcoming psychic power briefly touched Kurthuri's thoughts. 'I have something I need to share with you.'

'You spoke to the primarch?' said Syth.

'I have been in council with him for the past three hours, yes.' Kurthuri sat next to Syth. The younger Librarian looked at him finally. Balsar sighed. 'He will not go to Beta-Garmon. He is adamant.'

'But the signs... The calls are overwhelming!' There was a pleading look in Syth's eyes – an expression Kurthuri had never thought to see on a Space Marine. 'If he could but hear... Every waking moment it is there. You told him? You told him of the voices crying out, of the endless war?'

'I told him all of it,' Kurthuri replied sharply. 'As I promised I would. He will not go to Beta-Garmon.'

'Perhaps he is right not to,' Fara said quietly. He turned to face the Chief Librarian and reached out a hand, inviting Balsar to grasp it. 'I captured this a few minutes before I left the *Kosmoz*. I thought it better if you accepted it directly.'

'What is it?' Kurthuri asked, his fingers still a few centimetres from gripping Fara's hand. 'A broadcast? An intercept?'

'I am not sure. I do believe I was intended to receive it.'

Kurthuri laid his hand on the palm of the other Librarian and allowed their thoughts to merge. From among the subconscious froth rose a memory, like a landscape resolving into focus; it became larger and sharper until it encompassed Kurthuri. Fara set the recollection free and it drifted into Kurthuri's mind, seeping into his thoughts like water into sand.

Fara's memory became *his* memory.

Background noise. The swirl of the storm that had beset the galaxy for more than half a decade. Quieter now than the roar that had erupted from its creation. Lessened strength and long familiarity turned it to little more than static – annoying but no longer harmful. As one tunes the vox to a specific channel, so Kurthuri filtered out the sibilant rush.

In its place he recognised the phenomenon that had beset the warp for thousands of light years around Beta-Garmon. The immaterium was alive with broadcasts and messages and visions, as though the metaphorical vox set had been placed in a room with thirty others, a hundred others, all tuned at different frequencies. All were ciphered, little more than shrieks, babbles and distortion. Glimpses of visions snaked around the edges of Fara/Kurthuri's awareness. Colour, movement. Nothing more distinct.

He felt as well as saw, heard and smelled. Anger. Fear. A lot of fear, the Terror. A dread of war so great, the ripple of bloodshed that could drown worlds. And blackest fate. A blanketing darkness, a possibility of the end of all things, the defeat Fara/Kurthuri despised and feared more than any other. The Astronomican silenced, stilled, gone forever.

The potential death of the Emperor rippled back through time, a looming shadow on their thoughts

that had grown starker of late.

But it was not this that Fara/Kurthuri headed towards.

A piercing howl, a light of a bright flame. One and the same, they pierced the gloomy tumult.

A wolf at bay, surrounded by hounds and foul beasts.

And laughter. A cruel cackle, a booming guffaw, a heartless chuckle.

Through the dusk light slipped a lone silhouette, a wolf with ears drawn back, tail sagging, blood gushing from the wounds on its flanks.

But waiting in the darkness was something terrible, something vast and many-headed. Serpentine and doused in crimson gore, its eyes crackled with lightning.

'Where?' whispered Kurthuri as he took his hand away. He blinked, the face of his companion swinging in and out like a reflection of a settling pool.

'I could not tell,' said the other Librarian.

'It has to be the Wolf King,' said Kurthuri. 'Where is Russ? What has happened?'

'I tried to find it again,' said Syth, 'but even the echo has been swallowed by the maelstrom coming out of Beta-Garmon. I did find something else though. The trail of a wolfship nearby, one of the Rout's strike cruisers, I think. It was calling for help. Not far, no more than ten light years. They might know where we could find Leman Russ.'

Kurthuri pushed himself up, invigorated by the news. He needed to see the primarch again.

The first spread of bombardment shells took the enemy ship just ahead of its engines, while raking fire from the Word Bearers batteries raked across the prow of the *Providence*. Void shields sparked and sputtered, engulfing the Raven Guard battle-barge stem to stern with wavering blossoms of purple and white.

'Keep on them,' Agapito told his crew. 'Cripple their engines.'

The Word Bearers ship fired its manoeuvring thrusters hard, trying to brake its progress and turn to keep the *Providence* within the arc of its starboard gun decks. Targeting with its dorsal array, the Raven Guard ship had no such issue and continued to lay continual fire into the other vessel as it passed a few hundred kilometres beneath it. Rolling a quarter-turn about its axis, the *Providence* brought its own broadside to bear and unleashed a blistering cannonade of laser and plasma to accompany the bombardment shells.

Vented gases and bursts of energy bloomed from hull breaches around the stern of the enemy vessel. After another salvo the tubes of the engines fell dark.

'Steering, keep us below that ship. Gunnery, laser weapons only. Cut them apart.'

'Where are they going?' asked the ship's regular commander, Captain Khira, while his bridge staff complied with Agapito's orders. He referred to the Space Wolves strike cruiser that still headed on a direct course for the fourth world in orbit around the star simply marked on the charts as SV-87-7.

'Hail them and I'll ask,' said Agapito.

The communications officer did as requested. Agapito monitored the continuing bursts of laser fire from the batteries as his gunners systematically targeted small sections of the enemy's armour, directing focused pulses of fire to penetrate metal and ferrocrete many metres thick. A few minutes later the officer attracted Agapito's attention with a raised hand.

'I have Rathvin, a captain of the Third Company, commander,' said the lieutenant.

'Personal channel,' replied the commander, tapping a finger to the bead in his ear. He heard the crackle of the connection. 'This is Commander Agapito of the Raven Guard, Rathvin. I have been personally despatched by Lord Corax to speak with you.'

'*And welcome you are too, Commander Agapito*.'

‘You seem pretty occupied with getting somewhere. This sector is swarming with traitors, why did you drop out here and risk discovery?’

‘*As you say, commander, the whole sector is rife with Horus’ men, like rats in the bilge hold. We hoped they might not pay attention to a little ship like us. We were wrong. But never mind. We got here anyway.*’

‘This place is lifeless, what made you come here?’

‘*We have to pick up something for the Wolf King*.’

‘Important enough to be killed over?’

‘*Tell you what, Raven Guard, when you are finished with those Word Bearers tricksters, follow us in. I’ll show you why we came here*.’

Branne met Rathvin on a large asteroid in orbit over the fourth world.

It was literally a barren rock. With their gunships maintaining position a few hundred metres overhead, they moved in long leaps across the surface until they spied a metal column. No more than two metres high, it was almost impossible to see against the dark grey.

‘Here we are, Commander Branne,’ Rathvin said. His tone was solemn now as they bounded over to it. Branne’s auto-senses picked up a low yield radioactive register.

‘You came for a metal pole?’

‘It is a key-totem, you ignorant prison-son outlander,’ Rathvin replied, though without genuine rancour. ‘Watch and be enlightened.’

Now close, Branne could see that the column had faint runes inscribed in rings around it, and he detected a buzz of circuitry within. The Space Wolf operated a plate on the surface, moving it aside to reveal a fine mesh grille. A puff of vapour from his mask indicated that Rathvin had expelled a little of the air inside his helm. Tiny crystals drifted into the meshwork before the Space Wolf slid shut the aperture.

‘Gene-coder,’ he explained.

The tracery of sigils lit up, their yellow glow sharp in the vacuum. A rumble beneath Branne’s feet caused him to step back as the ground shifted.

Rocks parted to reveal a clinically white tunnel heading directly down into the rock, lit by a row of lumen strips along the ceiling. Rathvin started heading down before the gateway had finished opening. Branne hurried after him.

About forty metres down they came to a solid wall, as plain and white as the rest of the tunnel, save for a single badge in the shape of the VI Legion’s sigil. At a touch, a horizontal hairline crack appeared to either side. It widened a moment later, the upper and lower parts of the portal sliding effortlessly into the rock.

Beyond was a small, semi-circular chamber, an alcove no more than a metre deep. Inside was a pedestal about a metre and a half high, made of the same metal as the key-totem. A faint buzz and blur at its top betrayed the presence of a stasis field. When Rathvin stepped forwards, the haze dissipated to reveal an axe with a slender crescent-bladed head on an angled handle.

Rathvin plucked the weapon free, lifting it easily in one hand, swiping back and forth a few times.

‘All this way for an axe? It’s nice, but not worth losing a ship over.’

Rathvin said nothing. He spun on one heel, the axe held level. The head slid smoothly into the wall until the haft hit the rock, like a hot knife through tallow. Rathvin tugged it free, revealing a slender wound no more than half a millimetre thick.

‘It’s a *really* nice axe, you Ravens would say,’ said the captain. ‘Good for any foe. Even... Well, *any* foe. And our king desires it for a special occasion.’

Branne said nothing, but wondered why the Space Wolves would hide away such a weapon. When they turned back to the surface, he had a small revelation.

'That doesn't look like it was made on Fenris.'

'I never said it was, Commander Branne.' Rathvin put the axe over his shoulder and started up the corridor. 'With your permission, I would like audience with the Ravenlord.'

THREE

‘The Avenger’s more like a meeting hall than a battle-barge these days,’ Branne grumbled to Hef as they watched the small contingent of Space Wolves enter the briefing chamber Corax had adopted to hold his various audiences.

He glanced at Hef, who stared at the Space Wolves without blinking. It was hard to read the lieutenant’s expression these days, but Branne noticed Hef’s claws opening and closing with agitation.

The Space Wolves stopped just inside the room and looked around the chamber. Their gaze lingered on the Raptors a while longer than he expected.

‘The primarch is waiting,’ Branne said pointedly to Rathvin, irritated by captain’s expression as he passed an eye over the Raptors, as though an effluent system had become blocked and left a malodorous air in the hall. ‘Is there a problem?’

Branne noticed that Hef had moved behind him, putting the commander between him and the doorway.

‘What is it, Hef?’ the commander asked. ‘Stop loitering like a nervous potboy. And look at me when I address you.’

The lieutenant dragged his eyes from the new arrivals, glanced at Branne and then looked away, unable to hold his superior’s gaze.

When he spoke, he did so with deliberation, carefully articulating each syllable around his misshapen fangs. Branne hoped that was the only reason for the slow, stilted manner of his subordinate, but it was hard not to recognise the gradual degradation that had been suffered by the warriors under Branne’s command. Hef had fared relatively well, but it was sadly only a matter of time before his own twisted body became his worst enemy.

‘I feel... exposed.’ Hef stepped back, moving again as Branne took a sidestep to keep the Space Wolves in view. ‘They should not see me. Us. Not see the roughs.’

‘I see. Well, forget about them. Corax is not ashamed of your appearance, and you shouldn’t be either.’

‘It is not shame, but caution. Space Wolves won’t understand us.’ Hef moved from foot to foot, unable to keep still. It was uncharacteristic of the calmness that had earned him his officer’s rank. ‘Judgement on what we became.’

‘Who cares what some Sons of Russ think, Hef? Look him in the eye, let him see what you are. If you stand strong, they’ll respect you.’

‘Better not to stir the pan, commander.’ Hef retreated a few more steps, indicating his desire to leave. ‘With your permission, commander?’

‘No,’ said Branne. ‘I want you here. Stay at the back if you wish.’

Hef reluctantly nodded his ungainly head and moved behind the other Raptors, a distorted shadow of black fur and armour.

Branne returned his attention to the visitors, who had just finished introducing themselves to Corax. Branne had brought down one of Corax’s throne-like chairs and installed it in the briefing hall. The primarch sat, but he did not seem comfortable, perched at the edge as he leaned towards the Space Wolves.

‘Tell me what you know of Beta-Garmon, and the war that rages there.’

Rathvin shrugged.

‘Not much, Ravenlord. We have heard what you have heard, of the greatest of battles setting the system aflame.’

‘You have had no detailed instructions from your Legion?’ Corax frowned. ‘Are you in communication with your commanders? How did you receive orders to retrieve the artefact from SV-87-7?’

‘The Sons of Russ are not at Beta-Garmon, Ravenlord,’ said Rathvin with a shake of the head. ‘We fight at Yarant Three.’

Corax’s frown deepened. Branne turned to one of the consoles and brought up a small star map to locate the system. It was only three hundred light years from their current position.

‘Russ is at Yarant?’ Corax murmured, his brow creasing. ‘Against whom does he fight?’

‘Many foes. Alpharius has pursued us for years, and has brought some friends for the final reckoning.’

‘The Alpha Legion,’ Corax said carefully. Branne sensed the tension coming from the primarch – a feeling he shared. ‘With Alpharius himself? You are sure of this?’

‘Who can be sure of anything in these dark times, Ravenlord? The Rout fight at Yarant, and warriors from the Alpha Legion, World Eaters and Thousand Sons are ranked against them. So we were told.’

‘If Lord Russ fails, those armies will be free to reinforce Beta-Garmon,’ said Valerius, who had been taken back into the council of the primarch with the return of the Therion Cohort.

‘It’s still an open battle,’ said Arendi. ‘Is that the sort of engagement where we are best suited? If we could isolate the traitors’ supply line–’

‘Our brothers are trapped,’ Rathvin interrupted him. ‘That is all. We go to Yarant to die with our king and Legion, as far as you are concerned.’

‘That seems wasteful,’ said Branne. ‘Dying, I mean.’

Rathvin move his gaze to Branne, his expression fierce.

‘Many traitors will die first, I promise you, commander.’ He looked back at Corax. ‘You would be welcome, Ravenlord, to fight beside the Wolf King. As your man says, if you wish to influence the fight at Beta-Garmon, you might do well to make haste to Yarant Three. The Lord of Winter and War seeks an opportunity to strike a most unexpected blow.’

‘I unwittingly led my Legion into a trap and seventy thousand legionaries died,’ Corax said, eyes narrowed. ‘Why would I willingly lead the survivors into another?’

The Space Wolf shrugged again.

‘We are going to Yarant, Ravenlord, as my primarch ordered. Your business is your business.’ He glanced at his companions and received assuring nods from them in return. ‘But may I ask a question of you?’

‘Of course, what do you wish to know?’

‘A brother of ours, Arvan Woundweaver, do you know where he is?’

‘I have not heard of him before this moment, captain. Should I have?’

‘I had hoped you might,’ the Space Wolf said, his expression grim. ‘It seems that great Woundweaver is missing. He was sent to look for you, the mighty Ravenlord.’

‘To look for me?’ Corax sat back. ‘Do not give up hope yet that your brother lives. He did not find me, but I have made it my purpose not to be easily found. He might have already returned to Russ.’

‘It is unlikely,’ said Rathvin. ‘He swore an oath to fulfil his mission, as did I.’

‘What mission? Why was this Woundweaver seeking me?’

There was a pause and Rathvin looked at his brother legionaries again.

‘I can hear you subvocalising over the vox,’ Corax said sharply. ‘And I have learned a little Fenrisian from your gene-father over the years. Speak plainly, and quickly. What is a “watch-pack”, exactly?’

‘Emissaries,’ said the Space Wolf, but Corax was not satisfied with this and stood up. Rathvin retreated several steps. ‘Guardians of truth, then, Ravenlord. Messengers for Malcador and our liege. To ensure the Emperor’s will was upheld, that all stayed true to the cause.’

‘I see. *Guard dogs*.’ Corax loomed over Rathvin; his shadow engulfed the legionary. ‘Do you remember where I was born, captain? Do you think I would take kindly to such things? Why me? Why the Raven Guard? What doubts did your lord have?’

‘None! Watch-packs were sent to every primarch – Woundweaver was to find you. I was to locate Horus and seek his counsel, but events at Isstvan... Well, let us say that Horus’ loyalty stopped being a matter of doubt, eh? I heard of his turn before we ever came close to the system, and we were left fighting alongside some Iron Hands until a summons from the Wolf King brought us here.’

Corax withdrew, mollified by this answer.

‘Very well,’ said the primarch. ‘Should Woundweaver find me, I shall send him to Yarant.’

‘You will not come with us?’

‘Not directly. But I will aid my brother if I can.’

‘Then we shall look to your assistance, Ravenlord.’

A few formalities were arranged – vox-codes and channels, security protocols should the Raven Guard and Space Wolves meet again. Corax wished Rathvin well and bade him to convey the same to Russ, and then the Space Wolves departed. Corax was again in deep thought, his dark stare directed through the far wall.

‘We could save them,’ said Arendi. ‘The Space Wolves.’

‘It seems that their *many* enemies have finally caught up with them,’ said Corax. ‘We need room to operate properly. If Beta-Garmon is too congested for us, Yarant will be no better. I said we shall assist if we can, but I will not throw us into pointless battle.’

‘Not pointless,’ said Arendi, insistent. ‘We can rescue the Space Wolves.’

‘Enter a warzone, a system filled with traitor ships, attain orbital dominance over a particular region of a world and lift away the remnants of a Legion without becoming trapped ourselves? How do you suggest we achieve that, Gherith? How would we put our hand in that particular furnace and not be burned?’

‘Perhaps we should have asked those that did it once before,’ said Arendi. He looked at Branne and then Valerius. ‘I was not there, of course, but I hear it was a most spectacular achievement. Any suggestions?’

Branne kept his gaze fixed firmly on the primarch but he caught a momentary flash of discomfort on the face of the vice-Caesari. Agapito spoke before Branne could answer.

‘Circumstances aligned perfectly for our extraction,’ said the other commander. ‘Fortune as much as planning.’

Corax turned his gaze to Branne too, black orbs that burrowed into his thoughts.

‘Do you wish me to pull together a rescue mission, my lord?’ Branne said evenly. He looked at Valerius.

‘Would the Therions be prepared again to assist?’

‘I am at the disposal of Lord Corax, as ever,’ said Marcus. ‘In whatever capacity he desires. I am the instrument of the Emperor’s will. If he wishes us to deliver the Space Wolves from harm, we shall.’

‘Of course,’ Corax said quietly, his expression unreadable. He visibly focused, eyes quickly scanning the room. They settled on Branne. ‘Make some preparations, talk to Rathvin, see what you can find out about the situation at Yarant.’

‘We’re really going to do this, my lord? Again?’

‘I will consider all options, commander. *All* options.’

Navar Hef watched the Space Wolves depart, but still he could barely breathe. He was sure they stared at the Raptors as they left, certain their hands moved closer to their weapons at what they saw.

He turned his head to look at the other Raptors and found the gaze of Neroka fixed on him. The other Raptor, his face so perfectly formed in contrast to the monstrous visage of Hef, tilted his head towards the primarch and raised his eyebrows.

Hef shook his head.

Neroka frowned. His next look spoke volumes and Hef could read the intent instantly. *If you don’t say something,* it implied, *then I will.*

Reluctantly, Hef nodded. Neroka looked doubtful and the lieutenant scowled and nodded more forcefully.

While Arendi led his Black Guard away, Branne turned and dismissed his Raptors. The others turned and filed out in perfect step, but Hef stopped just at the door. Would Neroka really see through his threat? It seemed likely, and the longer Hef left matters as they were, the more it would fester. If for nothing else, he valued their bond more than he desired to avoid the consequences of confession. But was now the right time? The primarch had more than ever on his mind; he really needed nothing else to occupy him. The future of all of them hung in the balance; the decisions Lord Corax made over the following days would decide the course of the Legion.

Branne looked at him with a furrowed brow, of concern rather than anger.

‘What’s wrong, Hef? Are you in pain?’

The lieutenant hesitated. It would be simple enough to feign a convenient discomfort, admit himself to the apothecarion for a few days. The Space Wolves would be gone by then, the matter not quite as provocative.

Cowardly thoughts. Unworthy of a Raven Guard. He thought of Branne’s words earlier, his utter faith in the Raptors and their loyalty.

‘I need... I need to talk to you and Lord Corax,’ Hef said slowly. ‘There was an incident you must hear about.’

Branne’s gaze moved to the primarch, who sat alone, eyes fixed on a point on the floor.

‘Perhaps another time,’ said the commander. ‘Lord Corax is occupied at the moment.’

Hef almost deferred to Branne but a stab of guilt turned in his gut and he shook his head.

‘No, I must talk to you now.’ He lumbered past Branne towards Corax. ‘My lord!’

The primarch dragged himself out of his reverie and his dark gaze fell upon Hef. It took all of the lieutenant’s will not to flinch at that inhuman stare. He stopped in front of his master, gaze downcast. It was impossible to know where to start and Hef’s tongue failed him, thick and useless in his mouth.

‘Speak, lieutenant,’ Corax said, his voice gentle, coaxing. Hef forced himself to look up and, rather than the interrogating gaze of a warlord, he found himself looking into deep pools of sable, familiar and comforting.

‘I have... I have committed a terrible act, my lord. A terrible act.’

‘Tell me.’ Corax’s voice was neither stern nor soft. ‘Unburden yourself, Hef.’

‘The Space Wolf, Arvan Woundweaver. I killed him.’

The thrum of the cogitating machines and background hiss of the light fittings seemed deafening in the silence. Branne looked about to explode but the primarch stilled him with a raised hand.

‘Go on,’ said Corax, betraying no emotion.

‘On patrol. Wilderness system, VL-276-87.’

‘Your encounter with the Sons of Horus,’ Corax interrupted. His eidetic memory brought forth more details from Hef’s carefully constructed report. ‘A satellite base, weapons store. All enemy killed. Reactor breach during the fighting destroyed all of the stored munitions.’

‘The base belonged to Space Wolves. It was held by Woundweaver and the watch-pack sent after you, my lord.’

‘So you killed them?’ barked Branne, his fury finally breaking out. ‘Worse still, you kept it a secret from me?’

Hef began to stumble over his words, his careful and measured speech giving way to his bestial tendencies under stress. ‘Woundweaver saw us. Saw roughs. He hate us, I see it. And he would tell Lord Russ. We hear what the Space Wolf just say... I mean, just *said*. Watch-packs to judge our loyalty. Woundweaver was sent to look for deviation, and found deviants. His mission, given him by Russ himself. Said as much to me.’

Hef’s gaze pleaded with Corax for understanding.

‘Like Sons of Magnus?’ he continued. ‘The Rout, coming for the Raven Guard. Now is worst time for more dispute, more distractions.’

‘Russ would never–’ began Branne.

‘He would,’ Corax cut him off, ‘if he was ordered to do so by our father. If he thought we were a threat. If he saw... that is, if he doubted my loyalty.’

The primarch took a deep breath and his expression looked haunted for a moment as he considered the possibility of the Space Wolves being ordered against the Raven Guard.

‘He would do it, even amongst this carnage, to make the point,’ Corax muttered. His focus returned and he stared at Hef. ‘The reports were a fabrication?’

‘I ordered my men to secrecy,’ Hef continued. ‘Blame is mine.’

‘They didn’t have to comply with an improper order,’ said Branne. ‘Sign off on false reports. They are complicit.’

‘Did comply. Willingly, even. Every rough knows why I did it. Space Wolves were touched by... changes, like Raptors. Beasts inside. Some had gone bad when we found ship. Woundweaver and warriors had killed ones gone bad. Would see us, treat us like ones gone bad, kill roughs as well. “Weregeld”, he called us, called himself and the twisted ones. A price, he said. Price for what, my lord, he didn’t say. Woundweaver would come to Lord Corax, accuse him of crimes. Wanted to spare my lord difficult decision.’

‘Spare me?’ Corax looked amused for a moment, but his expression quickly hardened. ‘It is not your concern to spare me anything, lieutenant. The deed was perhaps ill-considered, but the concealment was a betrayal of trust.’

These last words elicited a gasp of genuine pain from Hef, as though Corax had thrust one of his talons through the chest of the mutated legionary.

‘I know, my lord! Very bad! I was afraid. Afraid for us. Afraid for you.’

‘Afraid...?’ said Branne, surprised to hear the word from a Space Marine.

‘Assessed a risk, commander,’ Hef tried to explain. ‘Conclusion not good for Raptors, not good for Raven Guard or Lord Corax.’

‘Understandable, Hef,’ said Corax. His next words dashed any hope that flickered into life in Hef’s breast. ‘But still unforgivable.’

‘I’ll deal with him, my lord,’ Branne sighed. ‘Confinement for the time being.’

‘No,’ said Corax. ‘You’ll do nothing for the moment.’

‘My lord? Surely some kind of punishment–’

‘And what do we tell the other Raptors, commander?’ snapped Corax. ‘Would you have this crime become the talk of the fleet? And with Rathvin not even departed from the *Avenger*? I need to consider all aspects of the situation.’

‘I am very sorry, my lord,’ Hef gibbered. ‘So very sorry. Would atone in any way, just tell me how.’

‘I will find a way, Navar Hef, mark my word. And I believe you. I accept your repentance and trust that you will conceal nothing from me again. Though I cannot strip you of your command without prompting questions, consider yourself returned to the ranks. You will exercise no command authority. Tell the others of your conspiracy that I am aware of it now, and that you will all remain in your dormitories until informed of your fate by Commander Branne.’

‘Of course, my lord. We are at your mercy.’

Hef loped out of the briefing hall, his heart still heavy, but lightened a little by his confession.

‘What’s to be done with them then, my lord?’

Branne’s question hung in the air. Corax did not know the answer. He had nothing. His vast intellect could not calculate a solution. His many years of experience threw up no precedents. The distilled wisdom of a hundred philosophers and political thinkers was high on principle and low on detail.

‘Leave me, Branne,’ he whispered.

The commander reluctantly complied, casting a worried glance at his lord at the threshold.

‘They made a big mistake, my lord, but they are loyal. Loyal to you.’

Corax said nothing and Branne left.

The primarch considered his options, trying to fit them into the wider picture. Yet however he looked at the situation it was the implications that dragged at his thoughts.

It was not the loyalty of the Raptors he did not trust, it was his own judgement. He had often thought of the Raptors as a polluted pool, in which pure water still remained in the depths, one that might be cleaned of its taint eventually. But what if the pollution, the corruption, went all the way to the bottom?

Weregeld, the Fenrisians had called it. A price to be paid.

It was superstitious nonsense. What agency would arbitrate such a matter? Who would judge it or impose the cost?

He considered the Raptors true Raven Guard in their hearts and minds, and had said as much to the Legion to assuage distrust of their twisted bodies.

Was he wrong?

A whirlwind of lightning scoured across a dark forest, its buzzing the cackle of a hundred thousand maniacs. Howls on the wind. The roar of bolters. The boom of shells. An azure storm filled the sky, every crack of thunder a heartbeat of a god, every pulse of light revealed a million watching eyes. Through the shadows of the impossibly vast trees loped the wolves, despairing and wounded, their dripping blood a crimson trail through grey bleakness. Their plaintive whines became the cries of dying legionaries that drowned out the turmoil of the storm...

Sweat-soaked, his heart hammering, Marcus Valerius rose from his sleep. Pelon was at the end of the

bed, sitting on a small, plain chair with a tumbler of water already in hand.

Valerius drank deeply, draining the cup before he passed it back to his manservant. Pelon placed the tumbler aside and stood up.

'Shall I fetch the journal, my master?'

'Yes,' croaked Valerius, throat still dry, lips cracked. 'And my uniform. Signal the *Avenger*, I have to speak with the lord primarch.'

The door chime woke Corax. He was still at his desk, the assembled reports from Branne arranged across its dark stone top. He did not remember falling asleep – almost an impossibility for one with his faculties. Yet how long since he had slept previously? A week? More?

The mind needed time to rest, restore, cogitate and absorb. It was not fatigue that had driven him to sleep, simply a shutting down of physical systems to allow his brain to focus away from the distractions of sight, sounds and touch.

And yet no revelation clamoured for his attention on waking. The dilemmas of the previous day remained dilemmas.

Though he was of no firm resolution, he was of a mind to return to Terra. Despite all that weighed against such action, Corax thought the company of his father, his brothers, might be the best place to stand at the end.

He knew the choice was cowardice – to avoid seeing Leman Russ, which would require full disclosure of what had happened between Hef and Woundweaver. That would mean revealing the deformed Raptors. How the Wolf King would react would be anyone's guess. It was better that there was no more division.

A crass rationalisation, but one Corax was happy to cling to for the moment.

The door chimed again.

'Open!' He sat up and straightened the papers. He realised it was dark – the chamber had dimmed the light strip after a period of inactivity. 'Lights up!'

The brightening illumination fell upon Branne, his face a mask of consternation. Behind him was Marcus Valerius in full uniform, agitated. Corax could not see him but he could smell a third man standing just out of sight in the corridor.

Corax beckoned. 'Come in, commander. Vice-Caesari.'

Branne looked apologetic.

'Marcus insisted, my lord. I told him you were occupied with strategy, but he says he cannot delay his audience.'

Valerius tentatively stepped across the threshold; another Therion in the uniform of a tribune, just behind, clutched a much-thumbed book to his chest.

'We have to go to Yarant,' the vice-Caesari blurted, stepping around Branne. 'We have to save Russ and his Wolves.'

'*Have* to, vice-Caesari?' Corax's lips thinned and his eyes narrowed.

'Sorry, my lord,' said Branne. 'I did not know what Marcus wanted. I thought it was urgent...' He placed a hand on the vice-Caesari's arm. 'We'll talk about this first.'

'No!' Valerius pulled himself away from the commander's grip. He turned and grabbed the book from his attendant and opened at a marked page. He started to read. 'A broken crown on a desert dune. A many-headed dragon issues from a cave bathed in blood.' He flicked to another leaf of the book. 'A howling wolf, swallowed by a storm.' He turned the page. 'A tempest of lightning engulfing a forest in which hide the wolves.'

'What is this?' growled Branne. 'Marcus, what are you doing?'

He made to snatch the book from Valerius but the Therion turned, blocking the Space Marine's arm.

'Warnings, my lord!' the vice-Caesari's fingers clenched the book and he stared at the primarch. 'My dreams, Lord Corax. Omens, visions. Portents from the Emperor. Another one. It can be done. We can rescue the sons of Fenris.'

'No more!' barked Branne. He grabbed hold of Valerius's arm and pulled him towards the door. 'The primarch does not need to hear this nonsense.'

'Unhand him, commander.' Corax spoke quietly, but his authority was absolute. Branne complied immediately, releasing his hold on the Therion officer. 'Marcus, explain yourself.'

'It is nothing–' started Branne.

Corax silenced him with a stare. 'Vice-Caesari, your explanation, please.'

'I have dreams, my lord. Prescient dreams. I see what will come. In metaphor, visions, impressions.' He took a deep breath. 'I know you must think me insane, my lord, but I can no longer hide the truth whatever the consequences. My faith demands such honesty or it is hollow. I thought at first the visions came from you, but I know now that they are a gift of the Emperor. Warnings he sends to me.'

Corax swallowed hard and kept his face passive. This was a conversation he had never expected. He was at a loss and took sanctuary in emotional detachment.

'Warnings? Dreams?' He looked at Branne. 'You seem to know of this already.'

The commander said nothing, but looked utterly wretched. He flinched from the primarch's gaze and then turned a dagger-stare on Marcus. 'The vice-Caesari has come to me before with such claims, my lord.'

'He has? And you did not think fit to tell me?'

Branne's silence was all the confession Corax expected. The primarch returned his attention to Valerius and gestured for the Therion to hand over his book.

'This is a record of your... visions?'

Marcus nodded and gave him the journal, reverent in the way he passed it to Corax.

'Some of them I do not understand, they are on matters beyond my knowledge, events I have not witnessed or identified. Many have come to pass. Some I have acted on, and they have proven their worth.'

The journal was of thin paper bound in cheap card – the sort of book issued to officers for making disciplinary and logistical notes when absent from a cogitator. The script inside was scrawled in uneven lines. The manservant's writing, Corax assumed, for a Therion of Marcus' breeding would have far better penmanship. As he looked more closely, he saw there were comments and marks in a far rounder, smoother hand – notes from the vice-Caesari. Some were clarifications, many didn't make sense, seemingly sentences out of context.

He flicked back and forth. Each page had a date, a location and then a garbled description of something Marcus had dreamed. At the bottom of a few pages, in Marcus' hand, were written places and dates in capitals.

'What are these? Corax asked. He turned the book and pointed at one such notation.

'Where the vision was proven true, my lord.'

Corax looked at the open page. The citation read *GHORNA, 676009.M31*. He skimmed the preceding vision, which spoke of a hot desert and a spring of fresh water washing away a black filth.

'Ghorna?' he said.

'An agri-world, my lord. I took the Cohort there and found Death Guard plundering its shipment stations. We slew them and resupplied.'

'I see.' Corax looked at other pages. 'How did you know to go to Ghorna?'

'Guesswork, mostly, my lord,' admitted Marcus. 'Or perhaps intuition, you might say. It was the third

system we checked. My visions are not precise, as you can see.' He whispered the next words, almost inaudible. 'Divine guidance...'

'And how does this relate to Yarant?'

'Repeated dreams, my lord, for several weeks. It's all in there. The wolves being hunted, the storm and the many-headed beast that stalks them is the same every time.'

'Yes, I understand that. But why do you say it means we can rescue them?'

'It doesn't,' Branne said quickly. He stepped in front of Valerius. 'Anxiety dreams, nothing more. The war takes its tolls in different ways.'

'Stand aside, commander,' Corax growled. 'I am speaking to the vice-Caesari.'

Branne reluctantly retreated, hands opening and closing into fists, his eyes flicking between the primarch and vice-Caesari.

'The first page, my lord,' Valerius said quietly. 'That will make everything clear. I didn't start taking the notes back then, but included all of my dreams when I began.'

Corax turned to the start of the journal. The dream spoke of a bloodstained hurricane across a desolate hillside. He read of crimson winds and the cawing of ravens. Hearts quickening, he absorbed the description of flames consuming the flock, turning them to sparks, their caws becoming the roar of bolters and thunder of battle.

The book shook in his trembling hand. He did not need to read further but all the same he had to look at the notation at the bottom of the page.

ISSTVAN, 566006.M31

Corax felt numb. His stare moved from Valerius to Branne and back again, not quite seeing either of them.

'*This* is what brought you to Isstvan? A dream?'

'A... A vision, my lord.' Valerius wrung his hands. 'To save you. I thought it came from you, but I was wrong. It was the Emperor reaching out.'

'You believe this?' Corax's gaze fell on Branne. 'You believe that the Emperor sends vice-Caesari Marcus Valerius visions to guide his acts?'

'No!' Branne shook his head fiercely. 'No, I don't believe that. I don't...' He turned on Valerius, lip curled. 'That is not what you said to me!'

'Where else might they have come from, but the Emperor?' pleaded Marcus.

Where else indeed? Corax stood up. He dropped the book on the ground, fighting to control his anger.

'Go,' he managed to say between gritted teeth.

'My lord, let me explain.' Branne took a step forward while Valerius snatched up his book and held it to his chest as though it was precious.

'Go!'

The primarch's roar was like a shockwave. The two Therions threw themselves to the floor, quailing in fear. Branne staggered backwards, reeling from the intensity of the outburst.

Corax revealed himself, dropping the blanketing aura that kept the majesty of his primarch nature hidden. '*Go!*'

Tears streaming down their faces, Valerius and his attendant fled. Branne bowed, shaking in his armour, and retreated to the door. He looked as though he might protest again but one final look at his master stilled any further comment and he too retreated.

Corax stood for a long time, fists on his desk, staring at the door. The lights seemed stark, too bright, too intense. He was laid bare before their scrutiny. There was nowhere to hide in the light, nowhere to find sanctuary.

'Doors. Lights down.'

He much preferred the shadows.

No ceremony, no guard of honour. A shortly worded summons brought Marcus Valerius back to the *Avenger*. He was met on the flight deck by Branne. The commander was alone, his face an impassive mask. Three days had passed since the vice-Caesari had shared his divinely inspired gift, during which he had heard nothing from either Branne or the primarch.

'What is his mood?' he asked Branne.

'I don't know,' muttered the commander.

'Why has he asked for me? Has he said anything to you?'

The two of them turned into the corridor and for the first time in many years Marcus was struck by how stark the interior of the ship was, how much it reminded him of the endless corridors and whitewashed chambers of the Ravenspire. No hangings, no paintings, no decoration. A prison still in its appearance.

'I've not spoken to him. He's kept to himself since you left.'

'It has been years since I've spent any amount of time in the company of the primarch but that cannot bode well.'

Branne said nothing for several minutes, until they reached their destination. It was Corax's personal chamber, not far from the strategium. The door was closed. Branne held out a hand to stop Marcus as he reached for the alert rune.

'Not yet, we'll wait for the others.' The commander's expression softened. 'There's something we have to talk about. I know why you had to tell him, but you should have spoken to me first.'

'I had not understood the implications, not until I heard about Yarant Three. Then it became clear and I could not hold my tongue.'

'Even so, you were stupid to bring it up like that. We could have approached Corax together, prepared him a little better.'

'But we have nothing to be ashamed of, why are you talking like this? We saved the Legion!'

'He has a lot on his mind lately.' Branne leaned closer, conspiratorial. 'Trouble with some of my Raptors. He is... sensitive to certain things at the moment.'

'With you, you mean?' Marcus looked at Branne and realised that his mood was not angry, it was pensive. He was even more worried by what Corax might say than the vice-Caesari. 'I am sorry. I did not mean to bring you into further disfavour.'

'Disfavour I can live with,' said Branne. 'I've talked to the other commanders – not mentioning you, of course – and we're worried he might do something ill-considered.'

'Lord Corax has the keenest mind of any in this fleet, an intellect to rival the greatest. I do not think he could ever be accused of stupidity.'

'You'd be surprised,' Branne murmured. 'Sometimes his spirit overrules his brain. I knew him before he was a primarch. Before *he* knew he was a primarch, back on Deliverance. He seems cold and calculating at times, ruthless maybe. But he feels it, I know. Think! He can remember every person he has killed, every wound inflicted, every injury suffered. Every planet crushed, rebellion destroyed, regime overthrown. He remembers it all, in precise detail.'

Marcus considered this, or tried to. It was too much to comprehend. Branne bent so that he was level with Marcus, eye-to-eye, his stare intense.

'The only thing that keeps him from breaking is knowing he has done the right thing, that the cause was just and the end result a benefit to mankind.' The commander glanced away and swallowed hard, unnerved by what he was about to say. 'If he doubts that... If he were to doubt himself for too long, ask too

many of the wrong questions, what would happen?'

It did not bear thinking about. Marcus had heard too many stories of the likes of the Night Haunter, Angron and Fulgrim to feel comfortable with the notion of Corax turning his back on the Emperor. He shuddered and evidently Branne noticed his reaction.

'You see. He is walking a precipice at the moment. The war turns upon small margins, a wrong decision now... All will be lost.'

'Perhaps he wants to lose...' Marcus could barely believe he had said the words, but the reaction from Branne, or lack of, proved that he had not been alone in thinking them.

'We need to give him something to fight for, to restore his faith in the truth.'

Valerius's hand moved to the pocket of his coat where he always kept a small copy of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*. No. That was not the solution. Corax was not of a mind to accept the Emperor's divinity yet, and any assertion of such would earn his greater displeasure.

'What about freedom?' suggested the vice-Caesari. 'The dream he aspired to from the start.'

Branne did not have time to reply. The sound of boots down the hallway announced the arrival of Agapito and Arendi. Marcus saluted the two commanders and received raised fists in response.

They waited in silence, all sharing similar disquiet. Agapito could feel the tension around Branne and Marcus, but he did not bother to ask its nature – his brother was almost a stranger of late and Marcus literally one by long absence.

Soukhounou arrived a few minutes later. Their council complete, none but the highest commanders present, Agapito stepped past his brother and pressed the rune to activate the door chime.

Ten seconds passed. Ten seconds that stretched into eternity, longer even than the first agonising salvo of the traitors' bombardment at Isstvan. That had been ten seconds of incomprehension, of mayhem and death. That had been ten seconds of activity, of scurrying for cover, of barking orders and trying to make sense of a universe that had imploded.

But ten seconds waiting for Lord Corax to bid them enter, when Agapito knew that so much was amiss, was a torture.

Eventually the door hummed open, to reveal the primarch sitting behind the plateau of his desk, hands resting one atop the other on the dark surface. He seemed placid, gaze moving from one arrival to the next as they passed into the chamber.

There were no chairs on their side of the desk and so they stood in a line, like errant scholam children summoned before their stern lesson master. Agapito had to wonder if the sense of humiliation was intentional and wondered again what transgressions Branne had committed beyond his knowledge.

'I have reached a decision,' said Corax. His eyes rested on Marcus. 'The army of the Therion Cohort will go to Beta-Garmon and lend the weight of their guns to the fight there.'

Valerius nodded hesitantly, stunned by the announcement. By all accounts coming out of the war-torn system, Beta-Garmon had become a whirlpool of destruction, dragging in more and more armies and fleets, crushing them against each other in a ceaseless crucible of battle that left only corpses and wreckage. Marcus' eyes were wet and he blinked rapidly, trying to clear them, understanding immediately that such a command was a one-way trip. Deliberately so.

'The army, my lord?' Valerius said, picking up on the specifics of Corax's command.

'Yes, and only such transports needed to move your men.' Corax pushed a data-slate across the desk. 'Your credentials, and my testimonial, to be presented to whomever is in command of the Imperial forces in that region.'

'My lord, is it wise to split our forces?' asked Branne.

‘The command has been issued,’ Corax replied bluntly, his eyes not wavering from the vice-Caesari.

‘And it is understood, my lord,’ Valerius replied with a deep bow. ‘We shall endeavour to bring victory in the name of the Emperor.’

Corax said nothing to this, but moved his gaze to Branne.

‘The recall of the Raptors to the *Avenger* is complete?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘The company will be rededicated to a specialist assault role. Given the dire nature of our supplies at present, all ranged weaponry will be given to the other companies and close assault drill will be adopted.’

‘You’re taking our guns away, my lord?’ Branne was as distraught by this pronouncement as Valerius had been by his orders. ‘Is this a punishment?’

Corax frowned, the first sign of emotion he had displayed since they had entered.

‘A somewhat petty act in the circumstance, if it was. No, I have calculated the best effectiveness of the forces I have to hand. The Raptors are too few in number to provide tactical or strategic support, and their ammunition and weapons would be better used by the other companies, who can be more flexible in deployment. The Raptors’ losses, both in battle and through continued degradation of ability, make them suited to this function.’

‘Like the breacher teams from the uprising?’ said Arendi. ‘Go in hard, turn the enemy’s eyes, allow others to manoeuvre into place.’

‘We called them the bait draft for a reason,’ growled Branne. ‘And they were *volunteers*. Hotheads, discontents. Terminal cases…’ His indignation became dismay. ‘Terminal cases. Is that how you see the Raptors then, my lord?’

Corax met the accusation with a placid stare. ‘You will assemble the Raptors into a shock force and drill them in decisive strike tactics. They will be the claw that punches through the enemy’s armour and the Talons, Black Guard and Hawks will be the weight of the fist behind them.’ The primarch leaned forward. ‘My planning will depend upon the Raptors, Branne. I expect you to lead them as you have done so already. As an example. From the front.’

The implications of the primarch’s words were not lost on any of them. Agapito shared a glanced with Soukhounou and the latter cleared his throat.

‘You have chosen a destination, my lord?’ the commander asked. ‘If only the Therions are heading to Beta-Garmon, are we returning to Terra?’

‘No, commander, we will not be returning to the Throneworld.’

Agapito wondered if he was the only one to think this sounded like a decree, the word ‘ever’ left silent but implied.

‘So, Yarant then,’ suggested Arendi. ‘To rescue Russ and his Wolves.’

‘Yarant,’ said Corax.

He did not address the second part of Arendi’s assertion, another unspoken but telling admission. Agapito’s growing sense of unease was fast becoming a more solid fear but he could not voice it.

The primarch was no more forthcoming and perfunctorily dismissed them back to their duties with an order to prepare for the warp jump to Yarant III as quickly as possible. As they left, the Custodian Arcatus was waiting outside, Captain Noriz with him.

‘Speak softly and accept whatever the primarch tells you,’ Agapito warned them as he passed. ‘Lord Corax is not in a forgiving temper today.’

The commanders assembled a little further down the passageway as the chamber doors closed. None of them spoke for a few seconds, unwilling to give voice to potentially rebellious thoughts and doubts.

Soukhounou, the Terran, who had been part of the Legion before the arrival of the primarch, broke the silence. It surprised Agapito a little that he spoke in support of Corax.

'Our fate is revealed,' Soukhounou said quietly, meeting the gaze of each in turn. 'We have our orders. Let us now do our duty as best we can, as loyal warriors. It is not our place to judge, only to fight.'

'*Victorus aut Mortis*, by the old tongue,' Branne murmured. 'Victory or Death.'

A call stopped Marcus before he set foot on the steps of the shuttle that would take him back to the *Glory of Therion*. He recognised Branne's voice and turned, surprised. For a heartbeat hope flared, the hope that Corax had relented in his decision and despatched Branne with fresh orders. Seeing the grim face of the commander quashed that hope moments after it had blossomed.

Branne caught up with the vice-Caesari. Marcus waited for him to speak, but the Space Marine was at a loss; his expression betrayed conflicted emotions. He was wrestling with feelings and thoughts that perhaps had not risen since he had become a legionary of the Emperor.

'What will be, will be,' Valerius said. He fidgeted with the sash across his breastplate – the Red a symbol of Therion bleeding for the Emperor. The cloth between his fingers gave him a little comfort. But only a little. The ragged copy of the *Lectitio Divinitus* in his pocket was his source of strength now. 'We cannot change the course of the past.'

'It is... not right,' Branne managed to say, as though these four words were a grand declaration of defiance.

'I understand,' Valerius assured him. The Therion general smiled. 'These are not the first complex questions I have had to face in recent years.'

'I'm sure,' said Branne. He exhaled, hard and long. 'It's a warzone, it's dangerous, but it's not a death sentence.'

'We both know the primarch's intent.'

'Do we?' snapped Branne. 'Why doubt what he says? Maybe he does hope the Therions can swing the battle at Beta-Garmon.'

'Then why keep our warships?' Valerius asked, holding up the data-slate the primarch had given him. 'His orders are explicit. We are to take transports only. The lord primarch has taken my cruisers and battleships and the best of the crew and officers. He did not see fit to share his intent for them. We will be reliant on other forces to protect us in the void.'

Branne said nothing.

'I know that you do not agree, but I believe that the Emperor shall watch over me,' said Marcus, reading the doubt in Branne's expression. 'What passes is by His will and plan.'

He raised his fist to his chest as a salute. The Raven Guard commander shook his head and extended a hand in friendship. Valerius took it.

'I'll see you at the victory parade,' said Branne, but the joke sounded forced, over-compensating.

Valerius could feel his knees weakening; the delay and Branne's awkward farewell only served to bring home the finality of the moment. He could not bring himself to look his companion, his friend, in the eye and he turned back to the steps. He would not let the commander's last sight of him be of a mortal man succumbing to his fears.

Back straight, strides measured, Valerius ascended to the shuttle.

He did not look back. The steps retracted and the door hissed closed.

Marcus Valerius never looked upon the face of Commander Branne Nev again.

Kurthuri sensed all was not well the moment he laid eyes on Corax. He did not need any psychic ability to see that the primarch was troubled. Corax stood with his back to the door, face hidden, but his shoulders

were hunched, and his hands made fists. Only the light of a few screens lit the chamber; all else was in darkness.

'My lord?'

'You are to return to Terra,' Corax said. He did not turn. 'I am disbanding the Librarius again, as commanded by the Edict of Nikaea.'

'Have I offended in some way, my lord? Have we done something wrong?'

'It is I that has offended, Balsar. I defied the edict, even though Arcatus and others expressly warned me against such action.'

'Circumstances have changed dramatically since the Emperor held council at Nikaea, my lord. Exigent circumstances.' Kurthuri took a breath. 'We have been most rigorous in our tests and checks, my lord. There is no taint here.'

'No taint?' Corax shifted but still did not look at the Librarian. 'A bold statement, Balsar. Who are we to gainsay the Emperor's judgement? It is not our place to determine the laws.'

'On a practical level, the fleet is poorly served with astropaths, my lord. If you wish for me to depart, that is well enough, but my brothers can still provide valuable service.'

'I did not ask for your opinion.' Corax flexed his long, pale fingers, as though opening and closing talons. 'Malcador and the Emperor will judge best what use you can be to the Imperium.'

'I understand, my lord. But might I suggest that my brothers remain, returned to the battle companies once more, as before. Just in case. If Lord Malcador sees fit to exonerate me, I shall convey as much to my brothers to avoid the delay of physical return.'

After a few seconds, Corax nodded.

'Very well. You will go to the Sigillite and receive his judgement in person. Your brothers are under ban of their powers again. Any use of them without specific order will be a capital offence. Am I clear?'

'Absolutely, my lord.' Kurthuri backed towards the door, fist held in a salute. 'One other matter, if you would indulge me, my lord.'

'What is it?'

'It seems wasteful to send a ship with a single warrior for cargo.'

'You will not be going alone, Balsar. The others will be waiting for you on the starboard flight deck in two hours.'

'Yes, my lord.'

Kurthuri left, worried by this turn of events but aware that he had salvaged what good he could from the situation. Of even greater concern was the primarch's demeanour. Not once had he looked at the Librarian during the exchange.

What was it that the primarch did not want him to see?

The flight bay was crowded as Branne waited for the last arrivals. Arcatus and his Custodians were already at the ramp of the Stormbird, Kurthuri close to them. Two dozen legionaries and officers in different liveries stood next to another gunship – the strays of other Legions the Raven Guard had absorbed over the past years.

Two in particular stood out – the metallic war-plate of Annovuldi, former Warsmith of the Iron Warriors and the midnight blue of the Night Lord Kasati Nuon. These two alone were the surviving loyalists from Legions that had sided with Horus, gathered to fight beneath Corax's banner in the years since.

Annovuldi attracted Branne's attention with a look but, before the commander could respond, the inward bay doors opened to admit Captain Noriz and the remaining Imperial Fists of his command. They trooped onto the deck in neat ranks and files, taking up their lines next to the other non-Raven Guard.

‘You get your wish a little early,’ Branne said to Noriz. ‘Back to Terra already.’

‘Yes, it seems so,’ the Imperial Fist replied, ‘though it leaves me in two minds.’

Branne did not have to ask concerning the nature of such divided thoughts. Arcatus stepped forward and made his doubt more plainly known.

‘Lord Corax’s behaviour of these last few days has not been reassuring, Branne,’ the Custodian Guard said. ‘Erratic.’

Branne fought the instinct to defend his primarch, but could not leave the accusation unanswered.

‘He knows what he’s doing,’ he told them all. Branne paced over to Kurthuri and then back to Noriz, but he looked at Arcatus. ‘Not erratic, he’s entirely within his character. Just not the one you’ve ever seen. None of you know about the Long Shadows, the night before we launched the uprising on Deliverance. As you can imagine, there were always a few rebels we had doubts about. Not their loyalty, maybe, but their motives, their courage, their ability. They’d proven useful enough in the preceding months, getting everything ready, but were they fighters? Could we trust our backs to them?’

‘Lord Corax does not trust us,’ said Nuon with a grim smile. ‘He is clearing out the unworthy.’

‘The distractions,’ Branne corrected him. ‘The “Long Shadows”, he called those he had chosen to not participate in the main assaults. He had another job for them, one they could undertake without him having to worry about what they’d done. In fact, he would be far past worrying if they had to do it.

‘The Long Shadows hid across the cell blocks. Their job was to man the detonation charges we’d placed on the dome generators and seal-ways. If it went badly, if the uprising failed, they were to blow the prison to pieces, break the domes and suffocate everyone inside...’ Branne stroked a hand across his brow at the memory. ‘There were to be no survivors that next day. No life in bondage, Corax had said. For all of us, volunteers, fighters, those that didn’t even know there was going to be a revolution. No middle ground. Victory or death.’

‘So he doesn’t trust us to help bring victory today, but is expecting us to clean up afterwards if he fails,’ said Annovuldi.

Branne nodded. He stepped closer to Noriz and pulled something from a pouch at his belt. It was the rusted iron ring with two equally corroded keys hanging from it – he had offered it to Noriz in a wager regarding which primarch would kill the Warmaster, what seemed like a lifetime ago now.

‘I figure Russ isn’t going to get to Horus any time soon,’ he told the Imperial Fist, holding out the prize.

‘You’re right,’ said the captain, taking the keys. Removing a golden shield from the lanyard on his right shoulder plate, he held up the Narandia battle-honour he had originally offered in return. ‘There’s been no word that Sanguinius is doing any better. It seems I’ll be wrong as well.’

Branne laughed and took the shield. He clasped it in his fist and banged Noriz’s breastplate a couple of times.

‘Don’t let the traitors take the Palace,’ he told the Imperial Fist. ‘I want to see it again.’

‘Then bring us Corax and the Wolf King, if you can. I’ll look for your return.’

Branne nodded once, but he knew that such was not in the thinking of his primarch. As the others boarded their gunships, Balsar Kurthuri approached. He gave Branne a salute.

‘My brothers will keep to their oaths,’ he assured the commander. ‘I can’t say what shadows surround the primarch of late but there is no taint amongst us. Stay true to each other, to him, to the Emperor.’

‘Have no doubt of it,’ Branne replied. ‘Say what you want about Beta-Garmon, about where we’re going, but Terra is going to be the last and greatest battlefield of this war, and you’ll be right there.’

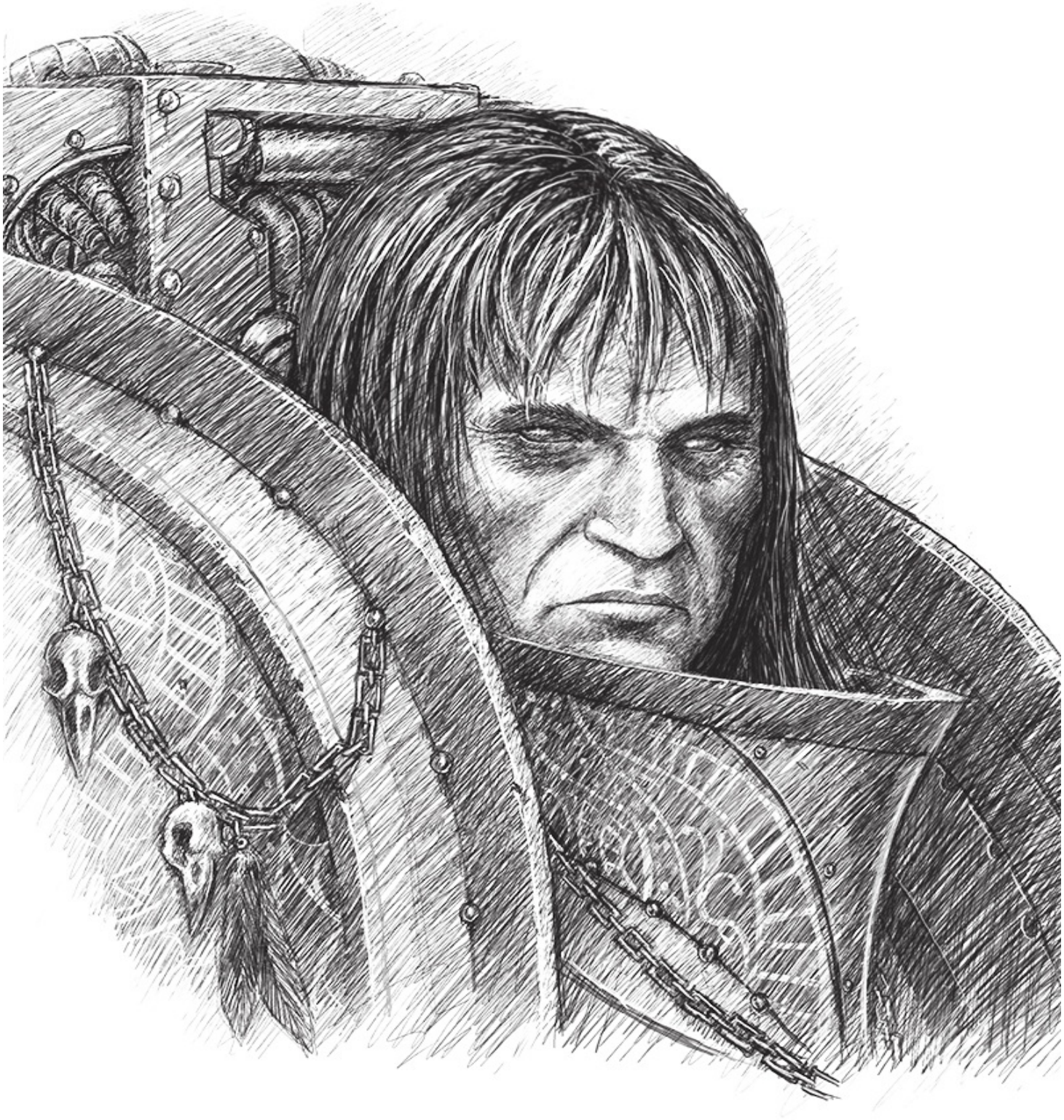
‘I’m certain that Malcador will find something needlessly complicated for me to do.’ He leaned closer, his voice earnest. ‘We are part of the universe, interacting with it and being shaped by it in ways impossible to trace beyond the immediate. I have gazed into the darkest corners of reality and they have

gazed back into me, but I am true to the Imperium and its creator. Every foe slain, every battle fought means *something*. If not that day then the next, or the next, or a year later or ten thousand years. Echoes of the greatest wars sound for a long time.'

Branne said nothing, taken aback by the frankness of those words, and not sure that he understood them entirely. He watched the Librarian board the closest Stormbird and then moved towards the corridor when plasma jets burned into life. The door was open, and Gherith Arendi waited in the passage.

'The Long Shadows depart,' said the leader of the Black Guard. 'The last night before the hardest day.'

'Corax has everything prepared,' said Branne. 'No more distractions, no more hangers-on. Tomorrow, we jump for Yarant.'



FOUR

Guided by the best Navigators in the fleet, the warships of the Imperial Army broke warp on the far side of Yarant's star, partially masked by its incandescence. Despite such precautions, their entry was not flawless. Alerted to their arrival, if not sure of their numbers and purpose, the orbiting flotillas of assembled traitor warships divided. Some continued their close support of the battle on the surface of Yarant III, but the greater part broke away to investigate the newly arrived threat.

The incoming battleships and cruiser seemed undeterred by the size of the fleet moving across the system to confront them. Passing the stellar boundary, they made battle lines in preparation to meet the renegade ships bearing down upon them. Perhaps believing the Therions and Natollians desperate or insane, the traitors managed their own formations to encircle the arriving warships. The two forces powered towards the inevitable contact, gun decks ready, shields crackling.

Committed, there was nothing that the traitors could do when Corax ordered the ships of the Raven Guard to deactivate their reflex shields.

Each battle-barge, cruiser and frigate was tethered to a Therion warship. Towed through the warp, each had crossed the translation boundary into Yarant at the exact same moment as its twin, invisible to all detection, even the senses of Librarians and Navigators.

The Legion ships had just enough time to detach their docking claws and power away from their surrogates, redirecting the output of their energy defences to banks of void shields.

Torpedoes from the two clashing fleets filled the void. While the traitors emptied their flight bays of gunships and interceptors the loyalists continued to accelerate, keeping close behind a wave of lethal ordnance.

The Raven Guard and auxilia had a single, simple objective: break through to the orbit of Yarant III. Their attack lacked finesse, but it did not need any. The ships of Horus' followers burned retro thrusters and manoeuvred hard to come to new headings, but it was too late to counter the single hammer blow directed at the heart of the traitor fleet.

Though outgunned across the system, Branne's genius ploy had brought the Raven Guard and their allies against just a third of the enemy. As the lead Alpha Legion ships parted to avoid the concentrated wave of torpedoes directed at them, the warships of Corax pounced, catching them in lethal crossfires.

Ship after ship passed through the centre of the splitting traitors; bombardment cannons and broadsides

hurled the last of their munitions, spitting plasma and las in constant salvos. While the traitors scrambled to recover some semblance of order, grand cruisers burned and battle-barges broke from stern to prow under the incessant attacks.

On the bridge of the *Avenger*, Branne cheered. He could not control himself, so pleased was he that the plan had actually worked. He gave no thought to the fact that Corax had specified that the strategy only needed to get them *to* Yarant – no consideration had been given to how they would leave the system. The *Avenger* formed the point of the attack alongside the battle-barges *Providence* and *Shadowed Guardian* commanded by Agapito and Soukhounou respectively, the drop pod cascades and flight bays filled to capacity from the rest of the fleet, ready to despatch the Raptors and Black Guard down to the surface in a single devastating drop.

'Well done, commander,' Corax said quietly, standing just to one side of Branne. The primarch had been so taciturn of late, so withdrawn, those three simple words were as much a cause for celebration as the success of his plan.

Giving no thought to return fire, their void shields flaring from the cannonades of their foes, the Raven Guard pressed on towards the battle on Yarant III. The Natollians and Therions turned, magazines still full from recent supply, gun crews at full capacity. The warships formed up to protect the Legion of Corax, creating a barrier of torpedoes, fighter-bombers and ships-of-the-line to dissuade the traitors from pursuit. Squadrons of destroyers and frigates hunted down crippled enemy ships many times their size and finished them with blasts from lance turrets and mass driver batteries.

Having been driven from orbit by the traitors, the scattered remnants of the Space Wolves fleet converged from the outer system too – guessing Corax's intent, they seized upon the arrival of the Raven Guard and headed back towards the contested world. Faced with approaching foes from opposite directions, the ships still at high anchorage faced an impossible choice: abandon their watch over the planet, or be trapped between two vengeful fleets.

Their commanders chose the worst of both, dividing their forces.

Many Alpha Legion ships and those of the Thousand Sons chose to withdraw before they were trapped trying to fight within the gravity well of the planet. The World Eaters universally opted to fight, supported by a few remaining Alpha Legion cruisers and vassal ships from the Imperial Army.

Their resistance did not last long.

As the Avenger closed towards high orbit, Corax immediately recognised the voice that hailed from one of the approaching Space Wolves squadrons.

'Captain Rathvin, I am pleased that you managed to make your delivery,' the primarch replied.

'I am sorry to say that it didn't help. But that is another conversation, Ravenlord, for another time.'

'How goes the battle? Have you received report from your high command?'

'Nothing but scraps. I hope it is because my brothers are more intent on waging war than sending communications.'

'I have to locate my brother. Early scans show fighting across a large battlefront. Where on Yarant is Leman Russ located?'

'I don't know, Ravenlord, but finding him shouldn't be difficult.'

'How so, captain?'

'Look for the greatest number of foes, the biggest battle. He'll be somewhere close to the middle of it.'

The pulse of anti-aircraft fire lit the skies. Flickers of blue and green gleamed from bleached bones – the

skeletons of vast beasts littered the Red Dunes for many kilometres. Huge ribcages and vertebrae jutted like the wreckage of war machines. Phalangeal outcrops and femur-propped hills shaped the ruddy sands, breaks against the gentle but constant wind that blew from dark frothing seas to the south.

Had the hab block-sized monsters been wiped out by some cataclysm, or had they been drawn to the Karadek Valley on some deathly migration over centuries in times past?

It was an idle interest that distracted Korin as he waited for the next opportunity to move. The Mor Deythan crouched in the lee of a thighbone that rose twice his height from a sand drift – and extended much further underground it seemed. In this sandy nook he waited, counting down the seconds until the closest laser cannon paused for its recharge cycle.

It used to be that the Shadowmasters had hunted in squads, using their unique Corax-gifted abilities to sow discord and terror amongst their foes. Now they worked alone, their number reduced to a handful amongst all the legionaries of the Raven Guard.

The Skyhammer gun emplacement just a dozen metres ahead fell quiet. Soundlessly Korin rose from his position, sliding over the dunes like a desert serpent. He seemed to flicker like the shadows cast by the more distant gun batteries, as though jumping from one shadow directly to the next.

He was within pistol range of the crew in a few seconds, but the weapon remained at his belt, his forearm-mounted blades dull for the time being. They were not his target.

The next salvo of fire lasted thirty seconds, a blind fusillade trying to catch the Whispercutters and Shadowhawks circling unseen above. With a loud whine, the gun powered down again. The crew, three Imperial Army soldiers, complained quietly about the weather while they blew on their hands in the chill night.

By the time the cannon opened fire once more, Korin was well past the boundary and heading towards his objective. He moved quickly now, inside the cordon of vehicles and patrols guarding the headquarters of one of the World Eaters commanders. Elsewhere along the battlefront, other Mor Deythan would be infiltrating the traitor lines in a similar manner.

The World Eaters command centre had been easy enough to find. Ciphers and codes were poor defence against the Raven Guard. The confusion caused by their attack had elicited a storm of traffic, broadcast on many media, and a flurry of messengers, gunship flights and other activity. Isolating the node points of such bursts identified the crucial elements in the enemy command network as easily as if they had erected flags to announce their presence.

In the case of this particular commander, he *had* hung flags – two Legion banners hung from cross-poles mounted on the backs of a pair of Spartan heavy transports that were parked close to the pre-fabricated drop-bunker he used as his command centre.

Korin found a spot in which to nestle that hid him from all angles except the bunker. He adjusted the auto-senses of his specialist war-plate, dropping down all the readings except audio, which intensified to bring the myriad sounds of the desert alive. The Shadowmaster existed in pure soundscape for several seconds – even the hiss of the wind over the sand shaped his picture of the environment. It was simple enough to filter out the extraneous noises to focus on human sounds.

He heard the World Eaters talking. Much he could not understand, either a local argot of their Legion or an artificial battle-cant devised for secrecy. It made no difference, as he heard a word over and again – Delerax. The name of the lieutenant commander. He was definitely in the bunker.

Korin slid closer to the outpost, his stripped-down armour making no more noise than the desultory snap of the flags and the hum of the Spartans' batteries.

There was no guard set at the door, though two legionaries manned the roof guns. Korin was already beneath the closest, the shield of his autocannon blocking his sight to the Shadowmaster. Almost within

touching distance of the bunker wall, Korin pulled a coin-sized beacon from his belt and tossed it to the base of the ferrocrete structure.

He withdrew quickly, lest by chance some enemy legionary happened to spot the low-spectrum signal pulsing from the beacon. Twenty seconds later he was a hundred metres away, concealed amidst the great bony landscape.

A spark appeared in the blackness, a blue dot that rapidly expanded into the plume of a missile engine. Sirens wailed across the traitor camp. Anti-air turrets whined but they were not quick enough. Korin smiled and tracked the executor missile right until the moment it struck the base of the bunker.

Like the Caestus assault rams used to breach fortifications, the executor was tipped with a melta detonator that seared through two metres of ferrocrete in an instant. The gleaming core of the projectile disappeared into the foundations. Half a second later the wall of the structure exploded, turned to fragments and particles carried aloft by an expanding plasma cloud.

It was not enough to destroy the headquarters, nor was it intended to be. The walls had gone though, the roof partially collapsed, leaving a five-metre hole open to the elements.

Overhead a Whispercutter glided noiselessly into the glow of the missile strike. Armoured figures along its length dropped away to fall groundwards – a Dark Fury squad, dedicated to assassination missions. Their jump packs whined into life just moments before they hit the ground, heard only by Korin among the shouts of dismay and confusion that had erupted from the remains of the bunker. The shimmer of lightning claws broke the shadows. Sergeant Ghelt, the Chooser of the Slain, led his Dark Furies into the ruddy light of the headquarters' interior and their claws crackled into deadly life, cerulean sparks reflecting from the plasma-smoothed edged of the crater.

Korin's mission was accomplished and he drew back into the darkness. When he was half a kilometre away, he signalled the Darkwing gunship from which Commander Agapito coordinated the decapitation attacks.

'Target Four-Alpha eliminated,' he reported.

'*Affirmative, Wraith Four. Await Whispercutter transportation to next target.*'

The traitors lost a dozen command-level officers. Augurs and vox-casts were met with static as the fleet of Raven Guard ships above Yarant III employed their 'shadowcast' strategy and blanketed all channels and wavelengths with fluctuating barrages of energy and traffic, making it impossible for anyone to communicate or scan for more than a kilometre.

The Raven Guard needed no such communications, for they had been carefully briefed, and down to individual squads knew their specific role in the battle to come. As the terminus of dawn crossed the battle line where the traitors continued their attack against the beleaguered Space Wolves, Corax led the main assault.

Mor Deythan and Dark Fury squads already on the surface attacked behind the enemy formations, picking objectives of opportunity to waylay or destroy. Under the cover of these fresh attacks, dozens of Stormbirds, Thunderhawks, Shadowhawks and Darkwings fell from orbit, unpowered for the first few kilometres, invisible to all augurs.

When their jets finally burned into life, they swept out from the glare of the rising sun, vague silhouettes against the glaring pale blue orb of Yarant's star. Missiles, rockets and lascannons announced their arrival; the fire of detonations raked through traitor squads and battle tanks massed for the next attack against Leman Russ's Legion.

Agapito was on a Darkwing in the first wave, leaping from the gunship with his command squad before it even touched down. The impact of his landing did not shock him, but the scene that greeted him gave

him pause for a moment.

The hillside was littered with hundreds of dead, in the livery of the Space Wolves and their enemies. Traitor guns pounded out a thunderous beat from the nearby batteries. The tangled remains of legionaries seemed to grasp at Agapito's feet, causing him to stumble, and dead eyes stared accusingly at him from broken helms.

In his mind he was back at the Urgall Depression, surrounded on all sides. He fired indiscriminately, shooting any figure that was not black-clad. There was no shortage of foes to target. Heavy-weapons fire screamed and whined past him, lighting the battlefield with more explosions.

And like Isstvan, Corax was there.

The primarch stood on the ramp of a descending Stormbird, his claws bright against the gloomy interior, an ornate pistol in his fist. He stepped away from the gunship into the rushing wind, his wings snapping out a second later. Corax soared down through the smoke and flames. Fire Raptor attack craft flanked the swooping primarch, their guns leaving trails of dead legionaries with their passing.

Unlike on that day when the civil war had begun for the Raven Guard, there was none to match Corax. No Lorgar or Night Haunter to stall his vengeance. Lightning strikes erupted from his claws as he landed, sweeping limbs and heads from the legionaries that swarmed towards him. His wings lashed out, their razor edges splitting traitorous bodies, eviscerating with each sweep of an ebon pinion.

'On!' roared Agapito, reloading his bolter. 'Into them!'

The Falcons, Talons, Black Guard and Raptor smooths surged into the enemy, racing over the bodies of dead Space Wolves and traitors.

Already destabilised by the attacks on their commanders, a fresh and vengeful foe in their midst, such officers as remained amongst the Thousand Sons, Alpha Legion and World Eaters ordered a retreat. They had the advantage of numbers, of guns and tanks. There was no need to be drawn into a futile melee against a raging primarch.

Agapito urged on his warriors, desperate to pursue. He knew that the enemy would rally and sweep all before them, given time.

Corax had another perspective. The primarch ordered his Legion to hold, to secure the withdrawal of the last Space Wolves, and it was with a knot of anguish in his gut that Agapito complied and brought his company to a halt. Gunships continued to harry the retreating traitors, but soon they had moved into range of their anti-air guns and the Raven Guard aircraft were forced to break off.

It was then that the orbital barrage commenced and fire rained from the heavens, driving the traitors even further back, splitting their armies, making them seek whatever shelter they could.

The ship attack continued until midday, when Corax ordered the fleet to conserve what ammunition remained to support the final attack. Caked in dried blood, his claws still sheathed with flares of lightning, the primarch strode the ruin of the enemy army, seeking any Fenrisians that might still live, guiding the Apothecaries to the wounded.

In time, he called his commanders to conference while the squads created a perimeter across the hillsides.

'Russ is not here,' the primarch said, perplexed.

'Is he dead already?' asked Branne. 'Are we too late?'

Corax said nothing to this, keeping his thoughts guarded. He turned and scoured the hills with dark eyes, then pointed to one of the distant mountain slopes.

'There,' he declared. 'Two hearth-ships of Fenris guard a fortress. There we will find the Wolf King. Lift the shadowcast and hail our friends. I would let my brother know he does not fight alone.'

'The enemy are not broken, my lord,' said Agapito. 'They'll come again.'

'Yes, they will,' replied the primarch. 'But we have a few hours. We will use them wisely.'

'I am Bjorn,' said the warrior that came forth to meet Corax. Squads of Space Wolves had assembled quickly across the battlefield, barring the route to the Fenrisian hearth-ships.

'You are one of the Wolf Lords, Bjorn?' asked Corax when the legionary motioned for the primarch to follow him towards the headquarters.

'No, not a Wolf Lord,' Bjorn's expression darkened. 'But the others... the Wolf Lords, think I have a *wyrd* upon me. My path has crossed the Wolf King's too many times for it to be chance, so the Runepriests say.'

'Wyrd? I do not recognise this term.'

'A fate, you might call it. Or a curse. A *geas*, for good or ill, entwined with the path walked by the Lord of Winter and War. A talisman, they hope.'

The Space Wolves formed a rough guard of honour around Corax and his commanders as they marched on the makeshift headquarters of the VI Legion. Columns of tanks and warriors were withdrawing, many thousands of Space Wolves converging from across the mountain and valley. The din of battle continued to reverberate along the slopes from further afield as more distant companies carried on the fight.

'Where is your primarch?' Corax asked, seeing no sign of his brother amongst the returning squads. 'I would speak with Leman Russ.'

Bjorn looked uneasy at this proposition and nodded towards the two gull-winged orbital landers.

'You should come with me.'

The Wolf Lords left, to hold conference on the defence of their last bastion on Yarant. Bjorn and other guards stood just outside the chamber, reluctantly allowing the master of the Raven Guard some privacy with his stricken brother.

Corax glanced towards the door, assuring himself that he would not be overheard. Like his ability to pass unseen, he could mask his words from notice or recollection. Thinking about these... *traits*... made him even more uncomfortable.

'It was a mistake,' he whispered, still kneeling with the Wolf King cradled close to his chest. 'We were a mistake, brother, I know that now. I see it for myself, in my own blundering. I see it in the eyes of the mistakes I created, just as surely as the Emperor sees it in ours. There is no sense of guilt, only good intentions gone bad.

'But this was not meant to be. *We* were not meant to be. The universe is correcting itself. Expunging the infection. How could I have been blind to it for so long? Pride? Arrogance, perhaps? To think we were better, stronger, special. Horus is only following his true nature. Have we simply been denying ours?'

Memories crowded into his thoughts, jostling for attention, each of them carrying a message so obvious in hindsight. He let out a long, rattling breath and laid his brother carefully back upon the makeshift bier. Then he stood, keeping his voice almost inaudible.

'We have been touched by forces beyond the Emperor's own design – you know this, brother, as well as I do. No good comes from that which in evil is born, no matter the purpose or cause. I look at Curze and see myself. Do you find Angron in your reflection? How thin is the veneer that keeps us loyal, keeps us civilised? But for chance, it seems, any of us might now have crossed that line. Does the line even exist, or do we simply draw it in front of us as suits our own vanity?'

He recalled words spat at him from the lips of a dying sorcerer on the Atlas city-platform. Yes, a *sorcerer*. Not a psyker, not a thing of science and reason, but a wielder of the arcane, the supernatural. Such things existed even if the Emperor would deny them.

'How could the Emperor create such demigods with science alone? Warriors that can withstand tank shells? Leaders whose every word must be obeyed? Creatures with powers far beyond any Thunder Warrior or legionary? Why do you think the Emperor decided not to simply recreate his children when they were lost? What unique gifts of darkness did he pass to you?'

'I used to think there was righteous justice,' he continued, his gaze moving from Russ to the warriors at the doorway. 'That whatever I did, it served humanity. There is only one way left to aid mankind, and it does not include our survival, O King of Wolves. This is not our universe, and it never was. You cannot create legends and myths in a laboratory.'

Other faces were in his memory, vying for attention, demanding that their messages be remembered. Nathian, the bolt-shell destroying his skull, a self-inflicted end to the turmoil. How had he known? How had Nathian seen what Corax had not?

'You often spoke of the Fenrisian notion of a good death,' said the Raven Guard. 'If there is such a thing, I desire it. I should have taken it on Isstvan. Time and again fate presented me with opportunity, but I denied it. Against Curze and Lorgar. I could have ended their vileness. And Angron. How many has he butchered since I fled his axes?

'Rational, sensible decisions, weighing advantage and cost, each time. But mistakes, all. The universe does not want us. It is unnatural that I survived.' He sighed, thinking of Marcus Valerius and the red sash that he wore so proudly. 'Visions. Visions sent by the Emperor? I think not. Something *else* guided those that rescued me. Another hand moved my warriors to intervene at Isstvan. Powers we do not willingly serve still bend us to their will through the manipulation of others. I was not *meant* to survive Isstvan, and all that has befallen us since is simply a correction of that failing course. It is not coincidence that we are here, facing annihilation once more. This time I embrace my destiny. I will let the darkness be expunged.'

He walked quietly to the door.

'Bjorn, I would speak with your leaders.'

Amlodhi Skarssen, named the Jarl of Fyf, bore a huge shield, two-thirds as tall as himself, circular in shape and bearing the blazon of the VI Legion in black upon a yellow field. The adamantium bore dents and cuts from savage blows that had been possessed of a strength that daunted even Corax. A Jarl of Torv, 'Scarred' Oki, stood with a spear of gold in his grasp. A third jarl, Sturgard Joriksson of the Rout's Ninth Company, bore an ornate bastard sword that was as tall as he was.

'You have thirty minutes,' Corax told the assembled Wolf Lords. 'The enemy will be upon us in half an hour. We have orbital supremacy for another sixty minutes, at least. That gives you enough time to evacuate the Wolf King and whatever warriors you have remaining. Our gunships are at your disposal as well as your own.'

The Space Wolves looked at the primarch in disbelief.

'Leave?' laughed Amlodhi Skarssen. 'You call into question our heritage and courage in the same breath, Ravenlord. Why would we leave, when our blades are still thirsty?'

'To fight again,' Corax said, slowly and deliberately. 'I am giving you the chance to save yourselves. To stand on the walls of the Imperial Palace beside the Emperor himself. I will be issuing orders to my Legion. Most are going to depart. You should leave with them.'

'The Allfather might be glad of the company, it's true,' said Ogvai. 'But I don't think we would be able to settle the weregeld.'

A chill ran in Corax's blood at those words.

'The weregeld,' explained Bjorn, speaking softly, his gaze moving constantly back to his comatose primarch, 'is a debt in blood. An unbalancing of the scales that must be set right, ere we pass from this

life.'

'This is our war, Ravenlord,' said Amlodhi. 'This is the battle we started. These are the enemies we have made. We have no regrets. But you would deny us the right to settle the balance.'

'You want to die?' Corax looked at them all, with their war-scarred armour and defiant stares.

'Do you... Ravenlord?'

The whispered words from Leman Russ caused them all to turn in surprise. Corax felt his stomach fall away, becoming a dark abyss that he wished would swallow him. The Wolf King raised himself on one elbow and gazed at his brother. 'Did you come here... to fight, or to die...?'

'What happened to you, my brother?' Corax asked. It was a few seconds before Russ replied, rising unsteadily to a sitting position.

'Nothing that matters now.'

He reached out, one hand to Amlodhi, the other to Oki. The Jarl of Fyf placed the Wolf King's shield upon his arm. The other hesitated, and Sturgard stepped forward. 'Would you not prefer your frostblade, my king?'

'Not today,' said Russ.

'Are you well?' asked Bjorn, his frown deep. 'You hate that spear.'

Russ chuckled, but then his face became sombre.

'Do you know why? The night after the Emperor gifted me with that footlance, I had a dream. I dreamed of fire and pain, and a storm that would engulf me. I woke certain that I would die with that weapon in my hand. Was that foretelling also part of the Emperor's gift? I don't know, but it seemed to me that I should not ever bear the spear out of choice.'

He gestured again for Oki to give him the weapon. The Wolf Lord hesitantly handed it over. Russ looked at Corax and tried to stand from the bier. His limbs trembled and he collapsed back, a terrible incarnation of the mind willing but the body weak.

'A good death, then?' said Corax.

'If there is such a thing, brother.'

'We'll not know either way, will we?'

'I suppose not.'

They regarded each other in silence for a minute, neither giving away their true feelings. Corax hated the part of himself that still desired for the Wolf King to take charge, to say that they would leave and return to Terra.

Russ grinned, toothily. 'We each carry our past with us. Many have come to settle their arguments with me – I should not like to disappoint them.'

He once again struggled to rise, his jarls pressing close. But the effort was too much and the Wolf King fell back, his eyes rolling closed, his breathing ragged.

'He'll give account before this is over,' Corax assured the legionaries, but the words were an empty platitude.

At a nod from Amlodhi, Bjorn stepped forward and took up the Wolf King's spear. There was a moment of resistance. Russ growled. His eyes flicked back and forth beneath their lids but did not open.

Then his fingers relaxed and Bjorn prised the weapon free. He moved to pass it to Oki but the jarl held up his hands and stepped away.

'It is a wyrd-weapon. You can keep it, Bjorn the Fell-handed.'

'The Wolftime is upon us,' Bjorn muttered. He ran a gauntlet up the spear and along the golden blade, the clawed fingers of his other hand gripping the shaft tightly. 'We're all doomed.'

In his shock, Agapito forgot all decorum. For a moment he cared nothing for rank or the Legion. In that instant he could do nothing but speak his mind to the man who had been a friend for many decades. 'Leave without you? You have to be insane to think we would agree to that!'

'If the Wolves can fight to the last, my lord, so can we,' added Soukhounou with a little more tact. 'There's no reason we should be above such pointless gestures, too.'

In the shadow of his Stormbird, itself dwarfed by the nearby ship, Corax prowled, as though still confined to a cell back on Deliverance. Around them, the Space Wolves made preparations for their final stand while squads of Raven Guard moved silently through the controlled anarchy of the mustering VI.

The enemy were clearly visible on the other side of the valley. Sporadic shelling had begun testing out the resolve of the loyalists to defend their fortress, while armoured forces manoeuvred for the final thrust.

'You will leave,' he said quietly, turning his black gaze upon them. 'I command it.'

'Except for the Raptors,' replied Arendi. 'You want to keep the Raptors. Why is that, Branne? What is special about you?'

The commander said nothing, his expression as dark as a storm cloud.

'This is my decision,' Corax told them. He looked straight at Arendi. 'My will.'

The commander of the newly formed Black Guard swallowed, fighting back a retort. He nodded to signal his acquiescence. 'As you order, so I obey, my lord.'

'You will take the rank of Legion Master, Gherith,' Corax added, eliciting more surprise from his commanders.

'That is your rank, my lord,' Soukhounou protested quietly.

'It existed before me, you know that best of all here present.'

'I am honoured, but perhaps–'

'*It is my will!*' The primarch's sharp retort and the flash of a claw startled them all. Corax glanced at the nearby Space Wolves and dropped his voice again. 'Let us not pretend any further. The Raptors have no future. It is better this way. In battle, with honour, as Raven Guard legionaries.'

'It's true,' Branne muttered. 'Better this way. For everyone.'

Agapito sighed and nodded his acknowledgement of their orders, and the others did so too. Corax looked at them in turn, his stare lingering, searching each for several seconds before he turned away and moved swiftly through the squads of the VI Legion.

None of the commanders said anything as each absorbed the import of what their primarch had said.

'I really thought we would rescue the Space Wolves,' Soukhounou admitted. 'I did not understand how deeply the darkness had settled in him.'

'You must believe me, I didn't want it this way,' Branne told them. He avoided meeting Agapito's gaze, his stare directed out across the gathering sons of Fenris. 'I mean, for you all to be sent away.'

'We all must die sometime,' said Arendi, slapping Branne on the arm. 'Be sure a tidy number of traitors go first.'

'Aye. We will be sure.'

Soukhounou shook his head. The Terran glanced between Branne and Agapito, and back again. Then he shrugged and walked away. 'I'll leave you to it.'

'Brother.' Agapito wanted Branne to look at him. 'Brother.'

'It fits, doesn't it?' the Raptors commander said, still watching the Wolves. 'I plucked you all from Isstvan. Now you are the ones leaving me behind. You said I would never know what it was like waiting to die there. You're right. How could I feel that?'

'Branne...' Agapito held out a hand, but his brother stepped away, avoiding it. He finally turned to look at Agapito.

‘I think about it. About that decision. So close... So close to thinking Valerius insane, to throwing him in the brig. What then? None of this! You would all be dead. I would be too. There haven’t been many of us, but we’ve made a difference, haven’t we? We’ve kept Horus and his filthy friends busy, right? But there was a moment–’

Agapito seized hold of his brother’s breastplate and pulled him closer. ‘What happened, happened. This isn’t punishment. This isn’t levelling the balance. It’s just what happens. We’re warriors, and this is war.’

They fell silent, hands laid upon each other’s pauldrons, eyes locked together. They had stood like that the night before the rebellion, knowing that it might be the last chance they had of fixing the image of each other in their thoughts. The memory was sharp for both of them still and, though they had both been changed in ways they had not imagined possible back then, for a minute they were naught but two brothers comforting each other on the eve of destiny.

It was Branne that pulled away first. He forced a smile.

‘We conquered the galaxy, Agapito. Two skinny prison boys not worth a spit. We saw the stars and walked beside immortals. Can’t complain about that.’

‘Damn right.’ Agapito laughed. ‘We would have been kings in lesser company!’

His laughter faded as Branne walked away, though Agapito watched him until he was lost amongst the Space Wolves.

Corax allowed himself to drift out of the awareness of those around him, moving from the conscious thoughts of his brother’s legionaries. Branne was already organising the remnants of the Raptors and the others were marshalling the rest of the Legion to orbit.

‘Is this channel secure? Can we be overheard?’

‘Fully encrypted,’ replied Nasturi Ephrenia. *‘I am alone as you requested, my lord.’*

‘Call me Corax,’ he said. A promontory provided a convenient seat and he lowered himself onto it to gaze out over the bustle of activity below.

‘It’s been a long time since I used that name informally,’ said the controller. *‘What has been troubling you?’*

‘You were the first face I saw, Nasturi. Alone, confused, abandoned. Yours was the first face in that cold, hard place where I woke.’

She said nothing, understanding that it was not her place to speak. Not yet.

‘I have been thinking about that moment a lot. That instant where past and future became one. What would have happened if the guards had found me first?’

‘I don’t understand, Corax.’

‘Could I have become something else? What is rooted in me, and what was grown by the company I kept? What if I had been raised by oppressors, and not the oppressed?’

‘That’s impossible to answer, Corax, and you know it.’

‘So help me. Tell me something good I’ve done. Something objectively beneficial.’

‘You saved my life,’ she said without hesitation. *‘That moment you are talking about? A second later, you killed the guard that had been my tormentor for as long as I could remember. You gave me his head as a gift. You never knew what that meant to me. I was so close to ending it. Even at that age, I was broken, without hope. I saw what they did to the others, what waited for me. Worse, if that guard had lived. I would have died soon enough, by his hand, or mine.’*

‘I... You never spoke of this before.’

‘I didn’t have to. I saw you rip off the head of the man that had terrified and abused me since I was born, and then I knew that everything would be all right. I knew that we could *fight back, that there*

was *justice and it was clad in white skin and black hair.'*

Corax suddenly remembered their meeting with such clarity that it hurt as much as the moment when it had happened, her pain writ so large on her infant features as the guard dragged her away by the hair. He had never seen it before in this way, but he could see it now – the absolute and personal terror she had felt in the grip of that man.

And her laugh, a reaction of sheer relief and delight when the young primarch had torn off the guard's head.

His eyes searched the mustering army and settled upon Bjorn, who stood alone, watching the approaching enemy, the spear of Russ driven into the hard ground by his side.

'We named you Corvus Corax for a reason,' she told him. *'The Saviour.'*

'Thank you,' he said, and cut the vox-link.

The drop harness was uncomfortable. It bit into Hef's flesh in strange places, not designed for his unnatural frame. He bore the discomfort in silence, holding back the growls that wanted to break free.

The pod was dark, almost pitch black. He could hear the reverberations through the hull of the *Avenger*. The thrum of void shield generators bursting into life. The steady rattle of macro cannons on the gun decks. The hiss of the massive dorsal turret turntable carrying the bombardment cannon and the thud of its firing.

The breathing of his companions was a mix of steady and laboured. Some of the Raptors hissed, panted and coughed, their breath coming from distorted throats and jaws, whistling from bestial nostrils.

Hef was no stranger to the wait before battle. His life had been filled with such since his induction into the Legion. Today he felt something else, something aside from the usual tension, the welcome anticipation.

He felt shame.

Nothing had been said, no accusation made, but he knew his actions had been responsible for the primarch's change in attitude to the Raptors. The final act of condemnation had come when Branne, stony faced, had brought together the company and rearranged them into roughs and smooths. All of the roughs were gathered into a few squads, to be deployed together from the drop pods when called upon.

Hef could well guess what manner of attack awaited him and his deformed brothers. Corax had finally tired of the lie, of hiding his secret abominations. This would be their last battle, no matter what the outcome.

They had heard what had happened to the Therion Cohort before the jump to Yarant, despatched to a war that nobody could win. Hef did not know what the Imperial Army soldiers had done to displease the primarch, but it could not have been anything worse than what Hef had done to Woundweaver and his watch-pack.

Thoughts of the Space Wolf's death brought a fresh surge of guilt.

Hef whined. He could not stop himself. It crawled from his throat unbidden, sharp and loud in the confines of the drop pod.

He hated himself more each moment. He hated what he was becoming, and the weakness within him that made him succumb to his own darkness. He was slipping away and the worst part was that he knew it. There would be a moment, a line crossed, when it would no longer matter, but until then he felt every second of his slide into feral insanity. The flesh could be tortured no more but his mind plunged into fresh depths.

'Finish,' he growled, wrapping his clawed hands around the restraints. His limbs trembled, filled with frustration and pain, desiring release. 'Finish!'

To stand as one warrior against the force of the traitors that surged across the valley was to be a pebble cast against the incoming tide but together the Raven Guard and Space Wolves faced the threat. Branne saw Corax emerge from the stronghold with Bjorn and the Wolf Lords. There was no sign of Leman Russ and his mood sank a little. Another primarch on the field of battle would have eased his thoughts.

The Sons of Russ made much ceremony of their preparations, and daubed their armour and faces with bloody handprints. There were chanting and howls, guttural oaths and the brandishing of weapons as they swore themselves to saga-worthy deeds. Branne saw wildness in the eyes of many – an animal glare he recognised all too well from the most devolved of the Raptors.

The followers of the Warmaster had spent the hours well, taking stock of the situation and planning accordingly. This was no hunt for the remnants of a Legion and their incapacitated leader, this was all-out war to exterminate the warriors of Corax and Russ. They advanced fast, sparing only the briefest time for a preliminary bombardment, trusting to proximity to protect them against attack from orbit.

It was a strange feeling for Branne, to finally have an inkling of what it must have been like on Isstvan, waiting for the inevitable blow to fall. There had been little by way of report from the battlefleet, but he had to believe that the greater number of the traitor vessels would soon be returning to Yarant, and would destroy the Raven Guard's last lifeline within hours. He had been present when Corax had ordered the remaining Natollian and Therion ship commanders to die fighting, to rain down death upon the traitors for as long as possible and then to turn their guns against the enemy ships.

The clamour of the Space Wolves, of clarions and war shouts swelled up around him.

He found himself strangely calm, accepting of this fate.

Commander Branne Nev readied his weapons.

The Raptors fell in behind the primarch, as did the Wolves, as though they had adopted the Ravenlord in the absence of their own commander. The Fenrisian companies advanced at speed, quickly outpacing the Raven Guard contingents, moving to meet the wave of legionaries that poured across the hillsides.

The VI Legion's veterans took up overwatch positions and opened fire with heavier weapons, gunning down the enemy warriors that tried to outflank them. Russ's Wolf Guard and several squads kept closer to Corax, guarding his back even as shells and missiles fell amongst them once more. The crash of the hearth-ship guns was lost in the tumult of gunship engines and battle cannons and the incessant snarl of thousands of bolters.

Movement above drew Corax's eye – gunships that bore the livery and markings of a different master to the warriors marching from the east. Not the blue of the Alpha Legion, but the dark war-plate of the XVI Legion's First Company elite.

So, the Sons of Horus were in force here, too. How portentous that renaming now seemed. In a single act, the dedication of the Luna Wolves to the Warmaster seemed in hindsight to be the culmination of all the ambition and selfishness that had manifested in Horus.

Corax watched as the many gunships disgorged squads of warriors wearing heavy Terminator armour, supported by at least a dozen Dreadnoughts. For whatever reason, Horus had sent his very best to ensure the destruction of his brother Russ.

The Ravenlord turned his attention back to the onrushing Legions. When the traitors were almost upon the line of Space Wolves, Corax took to the air and ascended in a spiral.

And then he disappeared.

It had been too long. The *Avenger* had fallen quiet, only the constant throb of reactors and void shields to disturb the calm.

Hef reached out a claw and flicked the communicator pick-up into life.

‘Command? Is Pod Two-Seven. No launch. Is malfunction, perhaps?’

‘Pod Two-Seven. No malfunction. No launch order given. Lord Corax has direct authorisation for Raptor launch protocols.’

‘Lord Corax?’

‘That is correct, Lieutenant Hef. We are awaiting the primarch’s direct order.’

‘Understood.’

Hef deactivated the vox. He could feel the eyes of the others upon him, but did not look up to meet their gaze.

Lord Corax had taken command of the Raptors away from Branne?

‘It’s just us, Hef,’ said Devor, from the harness to his left. ‘Just the roughs. The smooths went down with Branne, I’m sure.’

‘What is he waiting for?’ asked Sannad, his voice a hoarse whisper, the light of the drop pod casting a ruddy sheen over his milky-white flesh. ‘We can fight!’

Hef knew why. He owed it to the others to explain.

‘Last fight, for us.’ His nostrils flared at the thought. ‘Primarch send us into last battle only. Not want to show us unless nobody survive as witness.’

Cloaked by his unnatural power, Corax scythed into the unsuspecting World Eaters. Claws and wings slashed bloody ruin through the advancing ranks, leaving gouges of dismembered legionaries in his wake. He turned, rose, and fell again, decapitating a score of foes with his next pass.

Confusion rippled out through the army as this unseen blade sliced through its warriors. Focused on nothing but the death of his enemies, Corax swooped and ascended and dived again, each time carving ragged furrows through the companies of armoured warriors ascending the hill. Blasts from his pistol burst through the thickest plate, making short work of those that tried to retreat from the unseen apparition churning through their squad-brothers.

Though a hundred fell to his attacks in the first minutes, ten times that number surged onwards, unheeding of the terror assailing their companions, intent only on bringing the final humiliation to the Wolf King and his sons.

Corax watched Bjorn and the Wolves meet the incoming horde with their own charge. The spear he had taken from the hand of his unconscious lord was a glittering thunderbolt that flashed and burned, and each strike of its gilded head left half a dozen dead legionaries scattered over the scorched ground.

The Wolves of Fenris moved ceaselessly through the hail of autocannon and bolter fire, always one step away from the aim of their enemies, their plate sparking with the few rounds that found their mark.

A World Eaters Terminator broke from the melee and rushed Bjorn, twin chainfists splashing the blood of the Wolf King’s sons. Bjorn thrust out with his own clawed gauntlet, its blades piercing the warrior’s thick breastplate with apparent ease.

Corax killed a score more of the legionaries and worked his way back to his brother’s elite guard. Like a bloody whirlwind, he wove and turned, hacking apart those traitors that briefly eluded the Wolf Guard’s murderous swings and thrusts. The World Eaters did not relent, their implants forcing them into assault after assault that left them torn asunder by the wrath of the Ravenlord and his unlikely allies, their armour and flesh scattered as though tossed into the whirring blades of a gyroplane.

Around them the Raptors and Space Wolves formed into a tight defensive cordon, assailed on all sides by the combined fury of the Thousand Sons and Alpha Legion alongside even more of the World Eaters.

Only the Sons of Horus had yet to commit.

Hef waited, listened to his breath coming in gasps. The order had to come now. It would take several

minutes for the drop to complete – surely the primarch would call for his Raptors soon.

He activated the vox again.

'Command, is Hef again. Boost secure channel to Lieutenant Neroka.'

'Understood, lieutenant.' There was a slight pause. *'Your signal is being relayed now.'*

'Neroka?'

'Hef?' A grunt and burst of breath indicated that the other lieutenant was engaged in some strenuous physical activity. *'I'm in the middle of a bloody fight here, where are you?'*

'On drop pod, waiting.'

A series of snarls and curses punctuated the next few seconds.

'Why haven't you dropped?'

'Waiting for Lord Corax's personal command.'

'Well, we could certainly use you here, my friend. This battlezone is getting hotter than the furnace rooms. What is the primarch waiting for?'

Hef did not want to answer that question, but there was something he had to say.

'I was wrong. About Woundweaver. We not meant to know fear, but I could not let Space Wolves attack Lord Corax because of us. I am sorry.'

There was no reply.

'Neroka? Are you there?'

Only static answered.

Landing next to the grizzled Wolf Lord Sturgard Joriksson, Corax felt chainaxes and bolts biting into his armour from all sides, but he paid them no heed. Every flick of a wing, every twist of a claw, ended another traitor life. Each second brought him closer to removing the taint within himself, the corruption that was inherent in his creation and that of his brothers.

It was time to end it. Time to pay the price in blood.

He opened a vox-channel to the *Avenger*. 'Prime the pod cascade for drop-assault. On my next signal.'

'Affirmative, my lord, preparing for final wave drop.' Ephrenia's voice cracked as she replied, overcome by the moment. *'Goodbye, Corax.'*

He said nothing, plunging his claws into the gut of another legionary. So engrossed was he in the carnage that he did not hear the whine of the incoming shells and the hiss of missile jets until it was too late. By the time Sturgard heard it too, he barely had time to turn.

The first detonation parted the primarch and the Space Wolves, exploding right between them. The second hit Corax square in the chest as he leapt into the air, knocking him back to the ground. The third and fourth and more became a deafening, all-consuming storm of noise and fire that battered his body and ripped apart the ground around him.

He could feel his armour breaking under the pounding, his flesh splitting and burning, bones trembling under the ferocity of the artillery attack. Through the flashes he could just about see Bjorn struggle to his feet, spear lifted in defiance even as a frag missile exploded across his pauldron and showered him with white-hot metal shards. He fell amongst the broken bodies of a trio of Wolf Guard, the spear fallen from his grasp.

Corax's thoughts turned to the Wolf King lying broken and helpless in the last fortress of the Space Wolves.

Helpless for the first time in his unnatural life.

The Ravenlord had never turned from a single soul who had needed his aid. Would he really let his enemies murder the wounded primarch? Did his own desire for penance have such a grip on him?

From the height of the mountain flew a banner that he knew well – the standard of the Warmaster's reviled First Captain, Abaddon. Though Horus himself had not come to Yarant, he had despatched his right hand to oversee the final destruction of the VI.

The image of that banner was burned into Corax's mind, and one like it but far grander that had flown above the hills over the Urgall Depression.

The all-seeing icon of the Warmaster, the Eye of Horus.

I am the Emperor's vigilance, it had once read, *and the Eye of Terra.*

Such arrogance, such selfishness to turn the Imperium upon itself at the greatest moment in its history. The vanity of it appalled Corax, filled him with a loathing greater than that he had held for all his gaolers combined.

He rolled to his hands and knees, his wings a crippled mass of metal and wire trailing from his back. He slashed free of their entangling burden and stood up, swaying to one side as a rocket seared past his cheek and exploded amongst the circle of corpses around him and his brother's surviving lieutenants.

Horus still lived, still threatened Terra, still threatened the Emperor himself.

'What am I doing?' Corax whispered.

This was the price. This was his weregeld. To survive. To fight.

To feel the pain each and every day.

It was not his right to choose death. It was not his place to absolve himself of his sins. Only one being could do that, and he resided upon the Throneworld.

A fresh salvo of rockets and shells shrieked down towards them. Corax snatched up Russ's spear and threw his other arm around Bjorn. Though he no longer had wings to soar, Corax could still fly. He activated his jump pack.

Its blast hurled them free of the barrage and carried them fifty metres from the impact. Fire and smoke swamped them as they crashed into the unyielding rock of the mountain.

Corax rolled to his feet as Bjorn tried to fight from his grasp. The Space Wolf leapt up, spear seized from the ground, and for a moment the Raven Guard primarch thought his brother's fell-handed warrior would strike him.

'This is not a good death!' Corax snapped, stepping back. 'This is not how we leave! We don't get to choose!'

'You are not my father, to command me!' cried Bjorn, stepping back.

'There is a war to fight and if we win – *when* we win – we must remember who it was that brought this upon us. Not mortals, not humans, but ourselves. This was a war between the Legions. You, me, and all of my brothers have the potential for this heresy within us.'

'It's a little late to change our minds, don't you think?' Bjorn pointed with the spear at the battle that still raged around them. 'Surrounded, outgunned, our ships about to be burned in orbit.'

Corax activated the vox. 'Commander Branne.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Begin the shadow's parting.'

The commander exhaled with obvious relief. *'Thank you, my lord.'*

Ten seconds later the first strikes from orbit lanced down through the gloom, just a hundred metres from the shattered cordon lines. Orbs of plasma followed and, through the fresh fury of orbital attack, the silhouettes of gunships descended, their pinpoint strikes carving into the foe.

The Space Wolf shook his head in disbelief.

'Don't worry, Bjorn,' Corax roared, firing his pistol wildly at the traitor ranks, the release of the moment more than he could contain without pained laughter. 'We've done this before.'

Hef's jaw ached and he realised he had been worrying at the harness without thought, gnawing the padded bracing across his armour.

He craved an end. Blissful oblivion.

The lighting in the pod brightened, the ruddy gleam of the drop replaced by the ambient blue of the regular illumination strip. The address system crackled into life and Hef recognised Branne's voice, though he found it difficult to picture the commander – only vague impressions and memories surfaced through the cloud that fogged his thoughts.

'All stations, the evacuation has begun. There will be no drop. I repeat, the Raptors will not drop.'

Some of the others laughed. Hef slammed his fist into the harness release and dropped to the deck, falling onto all fours. He placed his forehead against the cold metal, his claws scraped on the steel and he started to weep.

Sitting back on his haunches, he let out his despair in a long, tormented cry.

Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, the most senior surviving jarl, sat opposite Corax in the compartment of the Stormbird, staring at the primarch. They said nothing for some time; the madness of the evacuation had left everyone preoccupied and exhausted. There was a cut above Ogvai's right eye and Corax could still see slivers of ceramite in the wound.

'You should see an Apothecary,' he said.

'What next?' Ogvai asked, ignoring the primarch's concern. 'You can count the number of Great Companies we have left on one hand. I figure you know exactly what that's like. What do we do? Where do we fight now, if the Wolf King does not awaken?'

'That's up to you. I am not my brother.'

'And you? What of the Raven Guard?'

Corax let out a long, weary breath. This all felt so hatefully familiar.

'We'll go where we're comfortable, where we can do the most damage to the Warmaster's forces as they march for Terra. We'll go back into the shadows.'

EPILOGUE

Corax paced slowly to the first cell door on the Red Level. He paused for a moment, repulsed and driven on in equal measure.

It had to be done.

Inside, he found a creature crouched in the corner, its skin white beneath clumps of thick black fur, its eyes round, ebon discs that stared at him without any obvious intellect. Even so, he could not ignore the similarities – the pale flesh, and the dark eyes.

They had fought the war, and they had won. Now was the time to put right the assertion he had made to the sorcerer Nathrakin, on the forge world of Constanix II.

'I have made several oaths in my long life, but I have been careful to swear only those I could fulfil – except for one,' he told the beast. He crouched next to the pitiful thing and it shuffled closer, comforted by his presence, though the sight of it broke the primarch's heart. 'One I now think may be beyond me. I looked into the face of our enemy, into the heart of the force that had corrupted them. I knew that, even if we killed Horus, that power could not be eradicated completely. Chaos will return with ever greater strength if we allow it, if we give it the vessels it seeks and feed the ambitions that drive the weak to its embrace.'

Corax recognised the adoration and trust that radiated from the deformed Raptor. He laid one massive hand upon the former legionary's head, and the fingers of the other curled around his throat. The creature's mouth worked a few times, and drool dribbled over Corax's hand and fell to the floor in thick gobbets.

'I remember everything, and I remember my exact words before I sent that fiend back into the warp-vortex that had birthed it...'

Tears stung the primarch's eyes.

'I... I promised him that I would destroy every warp-spawned, Chaos-tainted creature in the galaxy before I die...'

The mewling, groaning thing that had been Navar Hef met his gaze.

'And I have always kept my promises, my son.'

AFTERWORD

It's hard to talk about the Raven Guard without mentioning *Deliverance Lost* but, as I've written a completely different afterword for the hardback of that novel, I shall keep my thoughts on it here to a minimum. Instead I am able to delve into the novellas and short stories that have continued to tell the story of Corax and the Raven Guard since we left them, overrunning the Perfect Fortress of the Emperor's Children.

It is tempting to take each tale in turn, have a quick look at it in isolation and then move onto the next, but it would also be lazy. From the moment I first discussed *Soulforge* with Laurie Goulding, the Horus Heresy editor at Black Library, the plan was clear. There was unlikely to be another full Raven Guard novel on the schedule any time soon, so the story would be carried forwards in other, shorter forms. The arc of Corax and the development of the characters that would culminate in *Weregeld* (a title and subject we agreed right at the outset) would be threaded through every piece of fiction as if they were one volume.

Which, of course, they now are.

It's been a blessing, in a sense. Seeing the stories together has reminded me that we have crossed a lot of the galaxy and seen the years passing in a relatively short number of words. The novella and short story form have kept each episode distinct but relevant, and when read together they carry the story swiftly to the end in a way not possible in a more traditional novel narrative.

I'm also pleasantly surprised by how well the initial idea and the themes agreed on with Laurie have persisted in the various instalments. We've known the end point for some time – Corax's fate and that of the Raven Guard, like so much of the Horus Heresy, has been part of the Warhammer 40,000 lore for many years. Getting there, charting the course that would take a heroic defender of the weak to the point at which he must destroy his own creations, was always the goal, and to do it in a way that came across as not only convincing but also sympathetic and compelling.

When *Deliverance Lost* ends, the situation is dire for the Imperium. The galaxy is divided by the Ruinstorm, the Space Wolves and White Scars are currently missing in action while the Imperial Fists fortify Terra. Of the other Legions, especially those on the Ultramar side of things, only scant information is forthcoming. Having chosen to bring the fight to Horus and his forces, Corax and his Legion wage planetary guerrilla warfare to slow the Warmaster's advance in any way they can.

This concept is central to the character of Corax. His Legion is all but wiped out, but he will fight on... to the last warrior, if necessary. All of the primarchs are driven by their past and their upbringing, and through these stories I return again and again to Corax's motivations.

Coming to maturity amongst political prisoners has given Corax a strong ideology that drives everything he does. More than any of his brothers, he sees himself as a liberator – first as the saviour of Deliverance, and second as a commander of the Emperor's forces, freeing the galaxy from the persistent darkness of Old Night.

He does not see himself as a conqueror, though he has conquered worlds. He does not desire dominion over the people and territories he has brought to compliance and, perhaps foremost amongst his brothers, was ready and willing to relinquish power to mankind. Corax planned to compose a political treatise that would do for governance what Guilliman's *Codex Astartes* would come to do for warfare.

With the treachery of Horus brought to light, Corax found new determination and a fresh purpose. He knows better than most the sacrifices required for victory and, although he values life highly, he is far from a pacifist. Innocents will die, but Corax believes in his cause and hardens himself to their deaths. A greater aim drives him, allowing him to put aside the tragedies he must unleash in order to achieve that greater goal. As he says himself in *Soulforge*, 'War is a series of *intentional* catastrophes'.

Yet for all this, Corax holds back from a total ends-justify-the-means approach. It is this that separates him from the likes of Konrad Curze, the Night Haunter who has plagued his thoughts since their confrontation on Isstvan V. It is a hard path to tread, and perhaps one that brings Corax and his Legion more grief than necessary. He often chooses the harder ways, preserving the lives of those he has sworn to protect in favour of his own warriors, holding back from bombardment and annihilation for fear of causing too much collateral damage.

One might think that he is testing his own resolve at every opportunity, seeking to assure himself that the vainglory, selfishness and arrogance that has seen the fall of the greatest primarchs does not exist within him. This leads to self-doubt, and ultimately a questioning of everything he has done in the name of the Emperor.

On the other hand, Corax is well aware that he stands apart from humanity. He is not a mortal, something made very apparent by his own unnatural abilities and the status afforded him by the downtrodden of Lycaeus. He is a creature far removed from the humans that he protects and, while he may try to disguise his nature for the most part, he cannot deny it. It is in believing himself *different* but not *better* that he attempts to reconcile this separation.

Such was the stage when I sat down to write *Weregeld*, to complete not only Corax's story but also provide some closure on the other characters of the series. It seemed a tricky task, pulling together character stories from across the narrative, but with help from Laurie I identified all the pertinent threads and started tying them together. The more I worked on the synopsis, the more I realised that the central theme, the arc I had planned from the start, naturally brought everyone back into the orbit of the primarch.

I am not known for happy endings, and the story of the Raven Guard does not buck that trend. They are a microcosm of the Imperium, of humanity. Their trials, their woes, are a reflection of the greater story. It is a tale of the passing of hope, the twilight of all mankind's dreams of greatness – the end of the beginning, if not the beginning of the end.

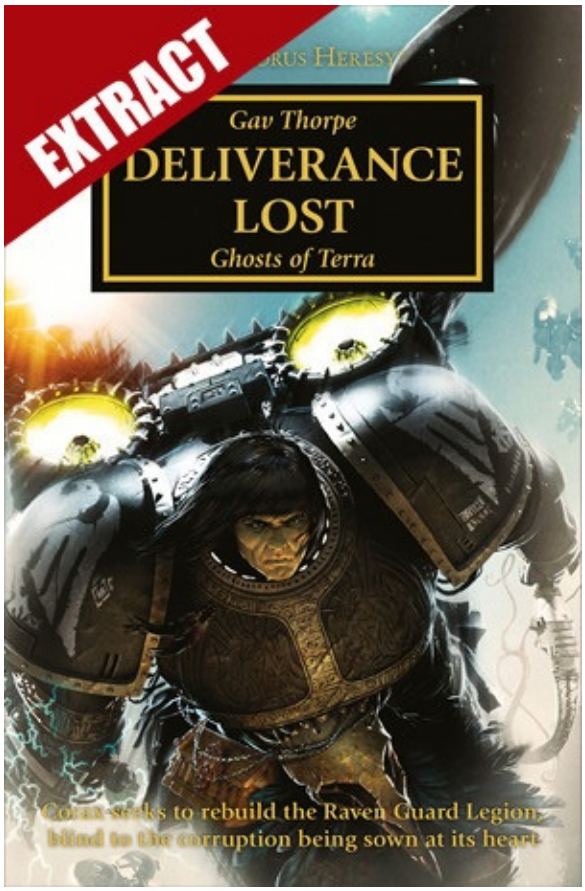
It is, as I intended when I named the novel that would form the pillar of the narrative, a story of deliverance, lost.

Gav Thorpe
April 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost,* as well as the novellas *Corax: Soulforge, Ravenlord* and *The Lion*, which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*. He is particularly well-known for his Dark Angels stories, including the Legacy of Caliban series. His Warhammer 40,000 repertoire further includes the Path of the Eldar series, the Horus Heresy audio dramas *Raven's Flight, Honour to the Dead* and *Raptor*, and a multiplicity of short stories. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, The Sundering, and much more besides. He lives and works in Nottingham.

An extract from *Deliverance Lost*.



The last time he had been in the Isstvan system, his departure had been very different. Eight hundred company banners had snapped and flapped in the strong wind, displaying the company insignias of the Legion in gold, silver and white upon black backgrounds. Wings and claws of various designs fluttered amongst icons of swords and shields. The purple and dark green heather had been trampled flat beneath armoured boots, large patches of blue lichen scuffed away by countless footsteps to reveal dark earth and pale rock beneath.

Drawn up in unmoving rank and file, the legionaries of the Raven Guard filled the floor of the Redarth Valley, their Stormbirds, Thunderhawks and other drop-craft commanding the heights around them, silhouetted against an early evening sky of dark blues and purples. Trails of ragged, violet cloud stretched from horizon to horizon as if dragged across the skies by the fingers of some godly hand. The air above the army was criss-crossed with vapour trails from patrolling aircraft, and pinpricks of light moving across the heavens showed the presence of the ships in low orbit, like slow-moving shooting stars carefully observing the proceedings below.

At the head of the valley, to the north, waited the Raven Guard's allies. In red and gold, the Therion Cohort stood beside their tanks and transports, arrayed in swathes of twilight and shadow cast by the immense Titan war machines of the Legio Victorum and the Legio Adamantus.

In front of the massed Legion waited a body of five hundred men. Most were garbed in plated carapace armour of shining black, their hoods drawn back to reveal heads of close-cropped hair, faces tattooed with swirling patterns. The soldiers' targeter lenses gleamed red in the dusk light, gun-halberds drawn up to the salute. At their front stood the elite guard, armoured in enamelled silver, surrounding a handful of civilian dignitaries in ornate robes and coats trimmed with gold braid and heavy epaulettes.

At a signal from one of the elderly men, the soldiers and leaders as one dropped to a knee and bowed their heads to the giant figure pacing slowly out of the ranks of the Raven Guard. The man approaching the Isstvanian delegation was more than a man: he was a primarch. Lord Corax, commander of the Raven Guard, towered above his superhuman warriors, his armour as dark as the night, chased with filigreed designs of towers and ravens and intricate scrollwork. His head was bare, showing pale flesh and straight black hair that hung to the exposed collar of his ornate breastplate. A flight pack fashioned with black wings stretched from the primarch's back, metallic feathers whistling shrilly in the breeze as he advanced. Dark eyes regarded the delegation with solemn pride.

With hands sheathed in clawed gauntlets, Corax gestured for the Isstvanians to rise.

'You kneel as a defeated foe. Now stand as men of the Imperium,' the primarch declared. His voice carried easily over the wind that tousled his hair across his thin face. 'We have waged war against each other, but the Imperial Truth has prevailed and you have sworn to accept its teachings. In complying with the Emperor's wishes you have proven yourselves men of wisdom and civilisation, fitting partners to the many other worlds you now join as part of the Imperium of Man. Not conquered, not subjugated, but free

men, who have shown courage and pride in defending their values but who have seen the light of the Imperial Truth and now welcome the benefits it will bring.'

Corax turned to his Legion and his voice increased in volume, echoing to the furthest ends of the valley with little effort.

'We have fought hard and we have fought bravely, and another world is brought from the darkness of superstition and division into the light of the Emperor's clarity and unity,' he told his warriors. 'It is with honour to the fallen and respect to all who stand here that I can declare the Isstvan system brought to compliance!'

A deafening roar of approval sounded from the vocalisers of eighty thousand armoured warriors, joined by cheers drifting down from hundreds of thousands of Therion throats; a clamour which was drowned out by the celebratory blare of the Titans' war sirens.

Almost fifteen years later, Corax had returned with his brother primarchs to bring the rebel Horus to account, but at the dropsite his former allies had shown their true colours. Turning on the Iron Hands, Salamanders and Corax's Raven Guard, the traitors had all but destroyed those loyal to the Emperor as they had dropped on the world.

Corax had survived the treacherous ambush, though only just. With the remnants of his Legion, the primarch had attacked and retreated, pursued across the wild hills and mountains of the world by half a dozen Legions. Now the Raven Guard had been forced to stand at the last, driven into the open to face the wrath of their pursuers.

The Raven Guard's first war at Isstvan had been a great victory. Their latest was a humbling defeat. It was a very different noise that provided the background symphony concluding Corax's latest campaign in the Isstvan system.

The first missiles from the World Eaters' Whirlwinds were streaking through the sky towards the Raven Guard. Corax's legionaries refused to take shelter, proud to stand their ground against this enemy after many days of hit-and-run attacks and desperate retreat. The explosions tore through the squads, slaying dozens. Corax stood amidst it all as if in the eye of a hurricane. His officers looked to him and drew strength from his bold defiance of the World Eaters.

Caught upon the windswept mountainside his Legion remained resolute. Behind the peak stretched great salt plains that had forced them into this last, defiant stand. Ahead of them massed the might of the World Eaters, the rage-driven Legion of Angron, who strode at their head roaring for the blood of his brother primarch. A sea of blue spattered with the red of gore swept up from the valley intent on the destruction of the Raven Guard. Maddened by neural implants and driven into a battle-frenzy by inhuman cocktails of stimulants, the berserk warriors of the World Eaters pounded up the sloping mountainside while their tanks and guns provided covering fire; every warrior bellowed his eagerness to fulfil the blood oaths he had sworn to his primarch.

As explosions rocked the slopes, missiles from the Whirlwinds hammering into legionaries and rock in fountains of fire, Corax glanced up to see more vapour trails crossing the open skies, but something was wrong with their direction.

They came from behind the Raven Guard.

Corax saw broad-winged aircraft plunging down from the scattering of cloud, missile pods rippling with fire. A swathe of detonations cut through the World Eaters, ripping through their advance companies. Incendiary bombs blossomed in the heart of the approaching army, scattering white-hot promethium over the steep slopes. Corax looked on with incredulity as blistering pulses of plasma descended from orbit, cutting great gouges into Angron's Legion.

The roar of jets became deafening as drop-ships descended on pillars of fire: black drop-ships emblazoned with the sigil of the Raven Guard. The legionaries scattered to give the landing craft space to make planetfall. As soon as their thick hydraulic legs touched the ground, ramps whined down and boarding gateways opened.

At first the Raven Guard were in stunned disbelief. A few shouted warnings, believing the drop-ships to be enemy craft painted to deceive. The comm crackled in Corax's ear. He did not recognise the voice.

'Lord Corax!'

'Receiving your transmission,' he replied cautiously, gaze fixed on the World Eaters as they recovered from the shock of the surprise attack and made ready to advance again.

'This is Praefector Valerius of the Imperial Army, serving under Commander Branne, my lord.' The man's voice was stretched, thin with tension, the words snapped out like a drowning man snatching breaths. *'We have a short window of evacuation, board as soon as you are able.'*

Corax struggled to comprehend what the man was saying. He fixed on a detail – Commander Branne. The Raven Guard captain had been left in charge of the Legion's home#world of Deliverance, and Corax had no answer to why Branne was now here at Isstvan. Adjusting quickly to the development, Corax realised that the Raven Guard who had been left as garrison were here, ready to evacuate the survivors of the massacre.

Corax signalled to Agapito, one of his commanders. 'Marshal the embarkation. Get everybody onboard and break for orbit.'

The commander nodded and turned, growling orders over the vox-net to organise the Raven Guard's retreat. With practised speed, the Raven Guard dispersed, the drop-ships launching in clouds of smoke and dust as soon as they were full, heading for the ship or ships that had despatched them. Corax watched them streaking back into the skies as shells and missiles fell once again on the Raven Guard's position. An explosion just to his left rocked him with its shockwave.

Ignoring the blast, Corax glared down the slope at the approaching World Eaters and their leader. The Raven Guard primarch had resigned himself to death here at the hands of his insane brother. It would be a fitting end to fall to Angron's blades, and there was always a slim – very slim – chance that Corax might instead cut down the World Eater and rid the galaxy of his perfidious existence.

A moment later, Commander Aloni was at his side. Like the rest of the Raven Guard, his armour was battered and cracked, a mishmash of plates and parts scavenged from fallen enemies. He had lost his helmet at some point and not found a replacement. The commander's tanned, wrinkled face betrayed a mix of astonishment and concern.

'Last transport, lord!'

Tearing his gaze away from Angron, Corax saw a Stormbird with its assault bay open, just a few metres away. Taking a deep breath, the Raven Guard primarch reminded himself of the teachings he had drilled into his warriors; teachings he had lived by for the whole of his life.

Attack, fall back, attack again.

This was more than a tactical withdrawal. This was surrender. It ate at Corax's gut to depart Isstvan in such shame. Corax glanced again at the drop-ship and back at the World Eaters. They were only a couple of hundred metres away. More than seventy-five thousand of his Legion had been killed by the traitors, many of them by the berserk legionaries rushing towards him. It was a dishonour to the fallen to abandon them, but it was pointless pride to believe that he could right the wrongs done here by himself.

Attack, fall back, attack again.

Biting back his anger, Corax followed Aloni up the ramp, his boots ringing on the metal. As the ramp began to close, he looked out across the World Eaters army, baying like frustrated hounds as their prey

slipped from their grasp.

'We survived, lord.' Aloni's tone conveyed his utter disbelief at the truth of this. 'Ninety-eight days!'

Corax felt no urge to celebrate. He looked at Aloni and the other legionaries sitting down on the long benches inside the transport compartment.

'I came to Isstvan with eighty thousand warriors,' the primarch reminded them. 'I leave with less than three thousand.'

His words hushed the jubilant mood and a sombre silence replaced it, the only sound that of the drop-ship's roar. Corax stood beside a viewing port, the deck rumbling beneath his feet, and looked at the hills of Urgall dropping away, picturing the thousands of fallen followers that he was leaving behind.

'What do we do now?' asked Agapito.

'We do what we have always done.' Corax's voice grew in strength as he spoke, his words as much a reassurance to himself as his warriors. 'We fall back, rebuild our strength and attack again. This is not the last the traitors will know of the Raven Guard. This is defeat but it is not the end. We will return.'

The cloud obscured his view, blanking it with whiteness, and he thought no more about the dead.

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